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R.A. SALVATORE

THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT® ANTHOLOGY



Annotated by the Author

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D&D®

THE LEGEND OF DRIZZT® ANTHOLOGY

The Collected Stories

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THE FIRST NOTCH

This was my first published short story, written in the heady days soon after I had become a professional author and while I was still working in the finance field for a high-tech company. The first two Drizzt novels, *The Crystal Shard* and *Streams of Silver* were on the shelves and doing well, and I was writing the third of the series when the opportunity to do a short story for *Dragon* magazine came up. Of course I said yes. (I loved *Dragon* magazine and wanted to work with then editor Barb Young.) And I was a new writer, finally getting the chance to let all of these stories pour out of me. Honestly, I couldn't stop writing!

And that, more than anything else, was the point of "The First Notch." I got to tell a story that featured Bruenor, whom I had come to love, and who was increasingly taking a back seat to Drizzt in the novels. The added hook for me was that always-enjoyable tease for readers. At the end of *Streams of Silver*, Bruenor had seemingly met his demise, so this story (intentionally) appeared as a sort of tribute to our lost friend.

The other hook for me going into this was my continuing fascination with dwarven culture, and the cockney accent I had slapped upon them. I was reading Brian Jacques at the time, marveling at his use of dialect, and honestly, I wanted to play. In this story, I certainly got that opportunity. It's all dwarves, talking, arguing, cheering other dwarves in a way only dwarves can.

Beyond that, the key line of the story is near the end: "Honor above anger." I didn't realize it at the time, but this became a

critical piece of the Bruenor puzzle as the Legend of Drizzt books went along, particularly when it came to the Treaty of Garumn's Gorge and the reasonable way Bruenor was forced to deal with King Obould. Honor above anger, pragmatism above passion—when it involved the clan for which he cared. Re-reading this story now, it amazes me how the individual characteristics of these Companions of the Hall became so deeply embedded in my subconscious that they remained so consistent over more than twenty years.





"Ye got it all?" asked the stocky young dwarf, his hand stroking his still hairless cheeks and chin.

The two smaller dwarves, Khardrin and Yorik, nodded and dropped their large sacks, the clanging as the bundles struck the stone floor echoing through the stillness of the deep caverns.

"Quiet, will ye!" snapped Feldegar, the fourth member of the conspiracy. "Garumn'd have our heads if he knew!"

"Garumn'll know well enough when we're done," said Bruenor, the stocky dwarf, with a sly wink and a smile that eased the sudden tension. "Sort it out, then. No time for wastin'!"

Khardrin and Yorik began fishing through the assorted pieces of armor and weapons in the sacks. "Got ye the foaming mug," Khardrin said proudly, handing Bruenor a shining shield.

"Me father's own!" Bruenor laughed, marveling at the stealth and nerve his younger cousins had shown. He slid the heavy shield onto his arm and took up the newly crafted axe that he had brought, wondering in sudden seriousness if he was worthy to bear the shield emblazoned with the foaming mug, the standard of Clan Battlehammer. He had passed the midpoint of his third decade, nearly into his threens, yet truly he felt a child when he thought of his hairless face, not a single whisker showing. He turned away to hide his blush.

"Four sets?" said Feldegar, looking at the piles of battle gear. "Nay! The two o' ye are to stay. Ye're too young for such fightin'!"

Khardrin and Yorik looked helplessly to Bruenor.

Feldegar's observation made sense, Bruenor knew, but he couldn't ignore the crestfallen looks on the faces of his younger cousins, nor the pains the two had taken to get them all this far. "Four sets'll be needed," he said at length. Feldegar snapped an angry glare at him.

“Yorik’s comin’ with us,” Bruenor said to him, holding the look with his own. “But I’ve a more important job for Khardrin.” He winked at the littlest of the four. “The door’s to be closed an’ locked behind us,” he explained. “We be needin’ a guard who’s quick to open, and quicker still with his tongue. Ye’re the only one o’ us sneaky enough to dodge the askin’s o’ any who might wander down here. Think ye can do it?”

Khardrin nodded with as much enthusiasm as he could muster, feeling important once again, though he still would have preferred to go along.

But Feldegar wasn’t appeased. “Yorik’s too young,” he growled at Bruenor.

“By yer measure, not mine,” Bruenor retorted.

“I be leadin’!” said Feldegar.

“Bruenor’s the leader,” Yorik and Khardrin said together. Feldegar’s glare turned dangerous.

“His grandfather’s the king,” reasoned Khardrin.

Feldegar stuck his chin out. “Ye see this?” he asked, pointing to the patches of hair on his face. “Whiskers! I am the leader!”

“Ah, yer no older than Bruenor,” said Yorik. “And he’s a Battlehammer, second behind the throne. And Battlehammers rule in Mithral Hall!”

“That tunnel’s not yet claimed,” Feldegar said wryly. “Outside o’ Mithral Hall, it is, and beyond Garumn’s domain. In there, the one with the beard leads.”

Bruenor shrugged the comment away, despite yet another reminder of his hairless face. He understood the danger and daring of their adventure and wasn’t about to see it all unravel over a title that would mean little when the fighting began. “Ye’re right, Feldegar,” he conceded, to the amazement and disappointment of Khardrin and Yorik. “In the tunnel, ye be leadin’. But by me figuring, we’re still in Mithral Hall, and me word holds. Khardrin guards the door, and Yorik goes.”

Despite his bravado, Feldegar was smart enough to give a concession to get a concession. He could snort and holler and stick out his beard all he wanted, but if Bruenor opposed him, he knew,

none of the others would follow him. “Then let’s get the business done,” he grunted, and he lifted the iron bar off the heavy stone door.

Bruenor grasped the iron ring on the door and reconsidered (and not for the first time) the path he was about to take. Of the five adult dwarves who had recently gone down to explore this tunnel, only one had returned, and his tale had shot shivers up the spines of the hardiest of Clan Battlehammer’s warriors.

And now Bruenor and his young friends, not one of them old enough to be counted among those warriors, had taken it upon themselves to clear the tunnel and avenge their kin.

Bruenor grunted away a shudder and pulled the door open, its swing releasing a gush of the cramped air inside. Blackness loomed up before them. They had lived underground all their lives, tunnels had ever been their homes, but this one seemed darker still, and its stifled air pressed on them heavily.

Feldegar grabbed a torch from a wall sconce, its light hardly denting the depth of the darkness. “Wait till we’re outta sight,” he told Khardrin, “then bar the door! Three taps, then two, means it’s us returned.” He steadied himself and led them in.

For the first time, Khardrin was truly glad to be left behind.

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The torchlight seemed pitiful indeed when the bang of the stone door echoed behind them. Boulders and rocks sent them stumbling and scrambling, stalactites leered down from the low ceiling, and rock buttresses kept them turning one blind corner after another, each promising a monster poised to spring upon them.

Yorik had brought a good supply of torches, but when the second had died away and the third burned low, the tension began to wear at their resolve. They found a flat stone to use as a seat and took their first break.

“Drat and begrudges on this whole thing!” growled Feldegar, rubbing a sore foot. “Three hours it’s been, an’ not a sign o’ the filthy thing! Me mind’s wonderin’ at the truth o’ the tale.”

“Then yer mind’s wanderin’ from its wits,” said Yorik. “ ’Twas an ettin that took the four, an’ not to doubt!”

“Wag yer tongues in a whisper,” Bruenor scolded them. “If the torch ain’t enough a beacon, the echo o’ yer words suren are!”

“Bah!” Feldegar snapped. “And if yer father were true to being a prince, he’d’ve come down here and finished the thing proper!”

Bruenor’s eyes narrowed dangerously. But he shook his head and walked a few paces off, not about to get into such an argument. Not here, not now.

“Bangor did promise to take the heads o’ the thing,” protested Yorik. “But after the merchants from Settlestone are gone, when there’s more time for plannin’.”

“And when the ettin’s got away?”

If they had been back in the halls, Feldegar would have paid for that insult with a few teeth, but Bruenor let it go. He knew that his father, Bangor, and King Garumn had done right in sealing off the tunnel with the heavy door until they could devote their fullest efforts to battling the ettin. Any ettin is a formidable foe, a two-headed giant more at home in the dark than even a dwarf. Careless and quick is not the way to go after an ettin.

Yet here he was with only two companions, and not a one of them even tested in real battle.

Again Bruenor fought through his fear, reminding himself that he was a dwarven prince. He and his friends had spent countless hours in training. Weapons sat easily in their young hands, and they knew all the tactics. “Come, let us be on our way,” Bruenor growled stubbornly, picking up the torch.

“I say when we go,” Feldegar countered. “I am the leader.”

Bruenor threw the torch to him. “Then lead!”

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“Is dwarvses! Is dwarvses!” Sniglet squealed in glee. “Threes of them!”

“Shh!” Toadface slapped him down to the ground. “Fives to three. And we sees them, but they not sees usses.” An evil grin spread across the big goblin’s face. He had come down this dark tunnel

from goblin town to loot the lair of the ettin, though truth be told, Toadface wasn't thrilled about going anywhere near the thing. Of such previous expeditions, the goblins had returned less than half of the time. But maybe Toadface had found an out. Wouldn't the goblin king be overjoyed if he delivered the heads of three hated dwarves?

The torch was still only a speck of light far down the tunnel ahead of them, but it was moving again. Toadface motioned to the largest of the others. "The side tunnel," he ordered. "Gets them when they crosses. Usses'll rush them up front."

They started off slowly and silently on soft footpads, each of them thinking it grand that dwarves used torches.

And goblins didn't.



The tunnel had widened out; ten could walk abreast, and the ceiling had moved higher as well. "High enough for a giant," Bruenor observed grimly.

The three moved into the classic dwarven hunting formation. Feldegar walked down the middle of the passage with the torch, while Bruenor and Yorik slipped in and out of the shadows of the walls to either side. While Feldegar controlled the pace, the two on the sides kept their backs to the walls, barely watching where they were going. In this alignment, Bruenor's duty was to Yorik, and Yorik's to Bruenor, each using the advantage of the angle to scout the wall ahead of his companion.

Thus it was Bruenor, to the left of Feldegar, who first noticed a side passage breaking off of the right wall. He motioned to his wary companions, and he and Feldegar waited while Yorik moved into a ready position behind a convenient jutting stone against the corner of the side passage.

Then Bruenor and Feldegar started out straight ahead down the main passage, seemingly taking no notice of the new tunnel.

The expected ambush came before they were halfway across the mouth of the tunnel.

Yorik tripped the large goblin who darted out at them, then dived into a roll behind him, taking him out with a hammer smash to the back of his head as he tried to rise.

Up ahead in the main corridor, the other goblins hooted and charged, hurling spears as they came.

Bruenor, too, was moving, crossing behind Feldegar. He saw the first spear break into the torchlight, aimed right for his young cousin, and dived headlong in front of Yorik, knocking the missile harmlessly aside with his crafted shield. Then he continued his roll to the safety of the jutting stone beside the side passage.

Feldegar didn't hesitate. Understanding the main threat to be up ahead, he flung his torch forward and brought his crossbow to bear.

Horrified to find themselves suddenly within the revealing sphere of light, the goblins shrieked and scrambled into the shadows, diving behind boulders or stalagmites.

Feldegar's bolt took one in the heart.



"Nasty dwarvses," Sniglet whispered, crawling up to Toadface. "They knows we was here!"

Toadface threw the little goblin down behind him and considered the dilemma.

"We runs?" Sniglet asked.

Toadface shook his head angrily. Normally, retreat would have been the preferred course of action, but Toadface knew that the option wasn't open. "The king bites our necks if we comes back empty," he hissed at the little goblin.



"How do we fare?" Feldegar whispered to Bruenor from a cranny in the other wall of the main tunnel.

"Yorik got one," Bruenor replied.

Groaning, Yorik crawled over to join Bruenor behind the jutting stone. A second spear had found the young dwarf's hip.

"But he took a hit!" the dwarf added in a voice he hoped only Feldegar could hear.

“I can fight,” Yorik insisted loudly.

“Wonderful,” Feldegar whispered to himself, remembering that he had argued against bringing the young dwarf. His sarcasm didn’t hold, though, when he took the time to realize that Yorik had foiled the goblins’ ambush and had probably saved his life.

“How many did ye make?” Bruenor called.

“Four up front,” replied Feldegar. “But one’s lost his heart for the fight,” he added with a grim chuckle.

“Threes to threes, then, wicked dwarvses!” Toadface yelled out to them.

Feldegar launched a second quarrel in the direction of the voice, smiling as it sparked off the stone just an inch from the big goblin’s nose.

“Wicked dwarvses!”

Bruenor worked to dress his young cousin’s nasty wound, while Yorik, ever a brave lad, fumbled out his tinderbox and torches, lighting them and heaving them down the tunnel to take away the goblins’ advantage of darkness.

And then they waited as the long minutes passed, each side searching for some way to break the stalemate and get in on their foes.

“Hold on the torches,” Bruenor whispered to Yorik.

“Mighten that we be here awhile.” Bruenor knew that time was on the goblins’ side. Dwarves could get around in the darkness, but lived most of their lives in torchlit tunnels. Goblins, though, knew only the absolute darkness of deep caverns. When the torches burned low, their enemies would strike.

“How much nasty lights has yous got, wicked dwarvses?” taunted Toadface, apparently seeing the same advantage.

“Shut yer face!” roared Feldegar, and he put another quarrel off the stone to emphasize his point.

Bruenor looked down at his young cousin and considered retreating. But that route seemed impossible, for Yorik obviously couldn’t run. Even if they managed to slip away unnoticed, the goblins would soon be on them. Bruenor saw one slim chance. Perhaps he was far enough from the light. If he could manage to get

over the jutting stone and slip around the corner into the shadows of the side tunnel, he could come back into the main tunnel right in front of the goblins' position, too close for another volley of spears.

"Wait here and ready yerself," he whispered to Yorik.

The young dwarf nodded and clutched his hammer, coiling his good leg under him for a spring that might propel him out when battle was joined.

Bruenor belly-crawled over the rock but froze when he heard Toadface's call.

"Lights is dying, wicked dwarvses," the goblin teased, hoping he could get the dwarves to run away. He figured that looting the ettin's lair was less dangerous than fighting against an equal number of dwarves.

Bruenor sighed when he realized that he hadn't been spotted. He eased himself out of the main corridor and down the side passage. So far, so good.

This second tunnel fell away steeply after a few steps, rolling down into the blackness of a huge chamber. Bruenor could only guess at its dimensions, but he understood the implications when he remembered suddenly that the survivor of the first expedition had mentioned a side passage in his tale of terror. And if the goblins had come down the main tunnel from one direction, and he and his friends from another …

"Time for …" he heard one deep voice say from the depths of the side tunnel.

"Lunch," answered another.

"Damn!" Bruenor spat, and he quickly slipped back to Yorik.

"Ettin?" Yorik asked him rhetorically, for Yorik had also heard the voices.

"What's the wait, Bruenor?" Feldegar called softly from across the way. "The torches'll burn low."

"Lunch …" one of the giant's heads answered for Bruenor.

"… time!" growled the other.

"Drats," came Toadface's voice from down the hall.

Bruenor knew the fight with the goblins to be at an end. They would flee at the approach of the ettin, and his group would be wise

to do the same. But what of Yorik? Bruenor grabbed at a desperate plan. “Get yer bow ready,” he called to Feldegar. “And me an’ Yorik ours,” he lied, for he and Yorik didn’t have bows. “Goblins won’t be staying for the ettin; take ’em in their backs as they leave!”

Feldegar understood the reasoning. “Oh, I’ve got me goblin all picked and ready,” he pointedly laughed, knowing his previous target to be the leader and wanting the big goblin to understand its peril completely.

“Lights I see!” boomed the ettin.

“Lights they be!” it answered itself.

“Waits, wicked dwarvses!” cried Toadface. “Dwarvses is not fer fightin’ two-heads!”

“A bargain, then?” Bruenor offered.

“Says it,” answered Toadface.

“A truce.”

“And runs?”

“Not to run,” Bruenor growled. “To fight!”

“Two-heads?!” Toadface shrieked.

“Run, then, and catch me bolt in yer back!” Feldegar reminded the goblin.

Caught in the trap, Toadface gingerly stepped out from his nook and moved to the corner of the side passage opposite from Bruenor and Yorik. Bruenor moved out around the jutting stone to face the goblin.

“Me and yerself trip it up,” Bruenor whispered to Toadface. “Bait it,” he then called quietly to Feldegar. Understanding the plan, Feldegar was already moving. He put his back to the wall directly across from the entrance to the side passage, waiting to meet the approaching monster head on.

Toadface motioned similarly to his forces, and Sniglet squeamishly moved out into the open next to Feldegar. But the last of the goblins, terrified, darted away down the darkness of the corridor.

Feldegar raised his crossbow and snarled.

“Hold!” Bruenor said to him. “Let the miserable rat run. We’ve bigger things to fight!”

Feldegar growled again and turned an angry glare on Sniglet, who shrank back. “Hold yer ground!” the dwarf snapped. He slapped the head of the goblin’s spear out toward the side passage. “And make yer throw count!”

“Left leg, right leg?” Bruenor said to Toadface. The big goblin nodded, though he wasn’t sure which was which.

The stamp of a heavy foot issued from the passage. Then another. Bruenor tensed and held his breath.

Ettins grew large in this part of Faerûn, and this one was big even by their standards. It towered fully fifteen feet, and its girth nearly filled the corridor. Even fearless Feldegar blew a sigh when he saw it, and when he saw, more pointedly, the cruelly spiked club it held in each huge hand.

“Goblin!” yelled one of the ettin’s heads.

“Dwarfmeat!” hooted the other.

“Goblin!” the first argued.

“Goblin, always goblin!” complained the second. “I want dwarfmeat!” The ettin hesitated for just a moment, giving Feldegar the chance to settle its foolish argument.

The dwarf’s crossbow twanged, the stinging quarrel nicking wickedly into the ettin’s ribs. The hungry giant looked at the impudent little dwarf, both heads smiling. “Dwarfmeat!” they roared together and the giant rushed ahead. One great stride carried it to the main corridor.

Toadface struck next. He leaped onto the ettin’s leg, biting and stabbing with his little sword at the huge calf muscles. One of the ettin’s heads cast him a curious, even amused glance.

The flat side of Bruenor’s axe smashed in just as the second leg crossed into the main corridor. The dwarf’s aim proved perfect, and the strength of his blow enough to shatter the ettin’s kneecap.

The giant howled and lurched forward, suddenly not the least bit amused.

And as it stumbled past, Bruenor completed the deft maneuver. He reversed his grip, spinning a full circle, and knifed the razor edge of his axe into the back of the giant’s leg, just where the hamstring

joined the knee. The leg buckled and the ettin fell forward, burying Toadface beneath it.

Then came a second stinging volley as Feldegar fired another quarrel and Sniglet threw one of his spears.

But the ettin was far from finished, and its howls were more of rage than pain as it hoisted itself up on its huge arms.

Not to be left out, Yorik sprang out from his concealment, rushing past Bruenor and swinging his hammer as he came. But his leg buckled under him before he was close enough for an effective strike, and the ettin, looking around for the source of its broken knee, saw him coming. With a single movement, the giant slapped Yorik's small hammer harmlessly aside and poised its wicked club for a blow that certainly would have crushed the prostrate dwarf.

Had it not been for Bruenor.

True to his brave and noble heritage, the mighty young Battlehammer didn't hesitate. He ran up the back of the prone giant and, with every ounce of power he could muster, with every muscle snapping in accord, drove his axe into the back of the ettin's left head. The weapon shivered as it smashed through the thick skull. Bruenor's arms tingled and went numb, and the horrid *CRACK!* resounded through the tunnels.

Yorik let out an audible sigh of relief as the giant's eyes criss-crossed and its tongue flopped limply out of its mouth.

Half of the thing was dead.

But the other half fought on with fury, and the ettin finally managed its first strike. Coiling its good leg under it (and scraping poor Toadface into the stone), it lunged forward wildly and swung its club in a wide arc at Feldegar and Sniglet.

The dwarf actually saved the little goblin's life (though Feldegar would deny it to the end of his days), for he grabbed Sniglet's shoulder and threw him forward, toward the ettin and within the angle of the blow. Then Feldegar dived sidelong, taking the ettin's club in the shoulder but rolling with its momentum.

Helpless on his back, Sniglet closed his eyes and planted the butt of his spear against the floor. But the ettin hardly noticed the little goblin. Its concentration was squarely on Feldegar. The dwarf had

rolled right to his knees, his crossbow leveled for another shot. At the *twang* of the release, the ettin reflexively ducked its head—

—impaling itself through the eye upon Sniglet's spear.

Sniglet squealed in terror and scrambled away, but the battle was over. With a final shudder, the ettin lay dead.

Bruised and battered, Toadface finally managed to push out from under the giant's leg. Feldegar rushed over to Yorik. And Bruenor, who had clung to the giant's back throughout, now stood atop the dead ettin's back, amazed at the sheer force of his blow and staring incredulously at the first notch he had put into the blade of his new axe.

Finally they regrouped, dwarves on one side of the ettin and goblins on the other. "Wicked dwarvses!" Sniglet hissed, erroneously believing that Feldegar had thrown him in as a sacrifice to the ettin. He quieted and slumped to the side of his boss when Feldegar's crossbow came up level with his nose.

Bruenor glared at his companion. "The truce," he reminded Feldegar sternly.

Feldegar dearly wanted to finish his business with the wretched goblins, but he conceded the point. He had witnessed Bruenor's awesome strike and had no desire to cross the young heir to Mithral Hall's throne.

Bruenor and Toadface stared at each other with uncertainty. They had been allies out of necessity, but the hatred between dwarves and goblins was a basic tenet of their very existence. Certainly, no trust or friendship would grow out of this joining.

"We lets yous leave," Toadface said at length, trying to regain a measure of his dignity. But Toadface wanted no part of the dwarves. He was outnumbered three to two, and he, too, now understood the strength of the beardless dwarf.

Bruenor's smile promised death, and at that moment he wanted nothing more than to spring over the ettin and silence the filthy goblin forever. But he was to rule Clan Battlehammer one day, and his father had taught him well the order of duties.

Honor above anger.

"Split the trophy and leave?" he said to Toadface.

Toadface considered the proposition, thinking an ettin's head and news of the dwarves a wonderful gift for the goblin king. (He didn't know, however, that the goblin king already knew all about the dwarves and thought it grand to have an ettin keeping unwitting guard.)

"Left head, right head?" Bruenor offered.

Toadface nodded, though he still hadn't figured out which was which.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *REALMS OF VALOR*
TSR, 1993



DARK MIRROR

I consider "Dark Mirror" to be one of the most important pieces of writing I've done in my career, from a personal development perspective. It helped that I was working with Jim Lowder, one of the most demanding and careful editors in the field, on this one. Jim never lets a writer get away with the easy path, or with a superficial tale. He asks "why?" all the time.

By the time I penned this tale, the initial exuberance of publishing had worn off, as well as the burst of nonstop writing I had experienced (out of terror) when I finally quit my day job in 1990. I decided to participate in this anthology for reasons of personal exploration above all else and I wrote this story to examine a curious paradox that had developed in the Legend of Drizzt. So many readers were mailing me to comment on the examination of racism in the dark elf books—and indeed, through Drizzt's trials and tribulations, I was able to explore and lay bare quite a few racist tropes; the analogies to our world were unavoidable, and I didn't want to sidestep them anyway.

But there was one problem: isn't traditional "Tolkienesque" fantasy all about racism? Elves are different from dwarves are different from halflings are different from humans are different from orcs and goblins. Yes, orcs and goblins, there's the rub. Isn't the notion of a race representing the embodiment of evil a classic definition of racism? Of course it is! So what if I punched Drizzt, so often the victim of racism, right in the face with his own prejudices?

What if I shook up the comfort zone of fantasy's broad strokes even more than I had (inadvertently) with my drow hero?

That's what "Dark Mirror" was intended to do. It also marked a transition in my own writing. As a young and eager author, full of excitement and energy and so many tales to tell, I thought I had all the answers. In fact, I thought it my job to speak the truth, if you will, to tell people the truth of things. I thought I knew everything (and I have come to realize that almost all young authors are possessed of similar arrogance). As I got older, I came to understand that I know nothing, and that my job isn't to give answers, it is to tease the readers to ask the questions of themselves. Simply put, I don't know the answers to the racial paradox "Dark Mirror" lays bare. I could give you a satisfactory explanation if pressed, I'm sure, and even include some quotes from Joseph Campbell or some other writing "god" to back up my "truths." It would probably sound quite impressive.

But even though I'm a fiction writer by trade, I try not to lie.





Sunrise. Birth of a new day. An awakening of the surface world, filled with the hopes and dreams of a million hearts. Filled, too, I have come painfully to know, with the hopeless labors of so many others.

There is no such event as sunrise in the dark world of my dark elf heritage, nothing in all the lightless Underdark to match the beauty of the sun inching over the rim of the eastern horizon. No day, no night, no seasons.

Surely the spirit loses something in the constant warmth and constant darkness. Surely there, in the Underdark's eternal gloom, one cannot experience the soaring hopes, unreasonable though they might be, that seem so very attainable at that magical moment when the horizon glistens silver with the arrival of the morning sun. When darkness is forever, the somber mood of twilight is soon lost, the stirring mysteries of the surface night are replaced by the factual enemies and very real dangers of the Underdark.

Forever, too, is the Underdark season. On the surface, the winter heralds a time of reflection, a time for thoughts of mortality, of those who have gone before. Yet this is only a season on the surface, and the melancholy does not settle too deep. I have watched the animals come to life in the spring, have watched the bears awaken and the fish fight their way through swift currents to their spawning grounds. I have watched the birds at aerial play, the first run of a newborn colt.…

Animals of the Underdark do not dance.

The cycles of the surface world are more volatile, I think. There seems no constant mood up here, neither gloomy nor exuberant. The emotional heights one can climb with the rising sun can be equally diminished as the fiery orb descends in the west. This is a

better way. Let fears be given to the night, that the day be full of sun, full of hope. Let anger be calmed by the winter snows, then forgotten in the warmth of spring.

In the constant Underdark, anger broods until the taste for vengeance is sated.

This constancy also affects religion, which is so central to my dark elf kin. Priestesses rule the city of my birth, and all bow before the will of the cruel Spider Queen Lloth. The religion of the drow, though, is merely a way of practical gain, of power attained, and for all their ceremonies and rituals, my people are spiritually dead. For spirituality is a tumult of emotions, the contrast of night and day that drow elves will never know. It is a descent into despair and a climb to the highest pinnacle.

Greater the heights do seem when they follow the depths.

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I could not have picked a better day to set out from Mithral Hall, where my dwarven friend, Bruenor Battlehammer, was king once more. For two centuries, the dwarven homeland had been in the hands of evil gray dwarves, the duergar, and their mighty leader, the shadow dragon Shimmergloom. Now the dragon was dead, killed by Bruenor himself, and the gray dwarves had been swept away.

The snow lay deep in the mountains about the dwarven stronghold, but the deepening blue of the predawn sky was clear, the last stubborn stars burning until the very end, until night gave up its hold on the land. My timing was fortunate, for I came upon an easterly facing seat, a flat rock, windblown clear of snow, only moments before the daily event that I pray I never miss.

I cannot describe the tingle in my chest, the soaring of my heart, at that last moment before the yellow rim of Faerûn's sun crests the glowing line of the horizon. I have walked the surface world for nearly two decades, but never will I grow tired of the sunrise. To me, it has become the antithesis of my troubled time in the Underdark, the symbol of my escape from the lightless world and evil ways of my kin. Even when it is ended, when the sun is fully up

and climbing fast the eastern sky, I feel its warmth penetrating my ebony skin, lending me vitality I never knew in the depths of the world.

So it was this winter's day, in the southernmost spur of the Spine of the World Mountains. I had been out of Mithral Hall for only a few hours, with a hundred miles before me on my journey to Silverymoon, which must be among the most marvelous of cities in all the world. It pained me to leave Bruenor and the others with so much work yet to do in the mines. We had taken the halls earlier that same winter, cleared them of duergar scum and all the other monsters that had wandered in during the two-century absence of Clan Battlehammer. Already the smoke of dwarven furnaces rose into the air above the mountains; already the dwarven hammers rang out in the relentless pursuit of the precious mithral.

Bruenor's work had just begun, especially with the engagement of his adopted human daughter, Catti-brie, to the barbarian lad, Wulfgar. Bruenor could not have been happier, but like so many people I have come to know, the dwarf could not hold fast to that happiness above his frenzy over the many preparations the wedding precipitated, above his unrealistic craving that the wedding be the finest ceremony the northland had ever seen.

I did not point this out to Bruenor. I didn't see the purpose, though the dwarf's incredible workload did temper my desire to leave the halls.

But invitations from Alustriel, the wondrous Lady of Silverymoon, are not easily ignored, especially by a renegade drow so determined to find acceptance among peoples who fear his kind.

My pace was easy that first day out. I wanted to make the River Surbrin and put the largest mountains behind me. It was along those very riverbanks, sometime around mid afternoon, that I encountered the tracks. A mixed group, perhaps a score, had passed this way, and not too long before. The largest few sets of tracks belonged to ogres. What worried me the most, though, since such creatures are not uncommon and not unexpected in the region, were the smaller bootprints. By their size and shape, I had to believe that these markings had been made by humans, and some seemed to belong to

a human child. Even more disturbing, some bootprints were partially covered by monster tracks, while others partially covered monster tracks. They were all made at approximately the same time. Who, then, was the captive, and who the captor?

The trail was not hard to follow. My fears only increased when I spotted some dots of bright red along the path. I took some comfort in the equipment that I carried, though. Catti-brie had loaned me Taulmaril, the Heartseeker, for this, my first journey to Silverymoon. With that powerfully enchanted bow in hand, I continued along, confident that I could handle whatever dangers presented themselves.

I stepped carefully, keeping to the shadows as much as possible and keeping the cowl of my forest green cloak pulled tight about my face. Still, I knew that I was gaining rapidly, that the band, holding to the riverbank, could not be more than an hour ahead of me. It was time to call upon my most trusted ally.

I took the panther figurine, my link to Guenhwyvar, from my belt pouch and placed it on the ground. My call to the cat was not loud, but it did not have to be, for Guenhwyvar surely recognized my voice. Then came the telltale gray mist, a moment later to be replaced by the black panther, six hundred pounds of fighting perfection.

"We may have some prisoners to free," I said to the cat as I showed Guenhwyvar the trampled trail. As always, Guenhwyvar's growl of understanding reassured me, and together we set off, hoping to discover the enemy before the onset of night.

The first movement came unexpectedly from across the wide expanse of the Surbrin. I went down behind a boulder, Taulmaril pulled and ready. Guenhwyvar's reaction was similarly defensive, the panther crouching behind a stone closer to the river, back legs tamping the ground excitedly. I knew that Guenhwyvar could easily make the thirty-foot jump to the other bank. It would take me longer to cross, though, and I feared I could not lend the cat much support from this bank.

Some scrambling across the way showed that we, too, had been spotted, a fact confirmed a moment later when an arrow cut the air

above my head. I thought of responding in kind. The archer ducked behind a rock, but I knew that, with Taulmaril, I could probably put an arrow right through that meager stone cover.

I held the shot, though, and bade Guenhwyvar to stay in place. If this was the band I had been tracking, then why had no more arrows whistled out beside the first? Why hadn't the stupid goblinkin started their typical war-whoops?

"I am no enemy!" I called out, since my position was no secret anyway.

The reply let me ease my pull on the bowstring.

"If you're no enemy, then who might you be?"

This left me in a predicament that only a dark elf on the surface can know. Of course, I was no enemy to these men—farmers, I presumed, who had come out in pursuit of the raiding monster band. We were unknowingly working toward the same goal, but what would these simple folk think when a drow rose up before them?

"I am Drizzt Do'Urden, a ranger and friend of King Bruenor Battlehammer of Mithral Hall!" I called. Off came my hood and out I stepped, wanting this typically tension-filled first meeting to be at an end.

"A stinking drow!" I heard one man exclaim, but another, an older man of about fifty years, told him and the others to hold their shots.

"We're hunting a band of orcs and ogres," the older man—I later learned his name to be Tharman—explained.

"Then you are on the wrong side of the river," I called back. "The tracks are here, heading along the bank. I would guess they'll lead to a trail not so far from this point. Can you get across?"

Tharman conferred with his fellows for a moment—there were five of them in all—then signaled for me to wait where I was. I had passed a frozen section of the river, dotted with many large stones, just a short distance back, and it was only a few minutes before the farmers caught up with me. They were raggedly dressed and poorly armed, simple folk and probably no match for the merciless orcs and ogres that had passed this way. Tharman was the only one of the group who had seen more than thirty winters. Two of the farmers

looked as if they had not yet seen twenty, and one of these didn't even show the stubble common to the road-weary faces of the others.

"Ilmater's tears!" one of them cried in surprise as the group neared. If the sight of a dark elf was not enough to put them on their nerves, then the presence of Guenhwyvar certainly was.

The man's shouted oath startled Guenhwyvar. The panther must have thought the plea to the God of Suffering a threat of some kind, for she flattened her ears and showed her tremendous fangs.

The man nearly fainted, and a companion beside him tentatively reached for an arrow.

"Guenhwyvar is a friend," I explained. "As am I."

Tharman looked to a rugged man, half his age and carrying a hammer better suited to a smithy than a war party. The younger man promptly and savagely slapped the nervous archer's hand away from the bow. I could discern already that this brute was the leader of the group, probably the one who had bullied the others into coming into the woods in the first place.

Though my claim had apparently been accepted, the tension did not fly from the meeting, not at all. I could smell the fear, the apprehension, emanating from these men, Tharman included. I noticed the younger farmers gripping more tightly to their weapons. They would not move against me, I knew—that was one benefit of the savage reputation of my heritage. Few wanted to wage battle against dark elves. And even if I had not been an exotic drow, the farmers would not have attacked with the mighty panther crouched beside me. They knew that they were overmatched, and they knew, too, that they needed an ally, any ally, to help them in their pursuit.

Five men, farmers all, poorly armed and poorly armored. What in the Nine Hells did they expect to do against a band of twenty monsters, ogres included? Still, I had to admire their courage, and I could not discount them as foolish. I believed that the raiders had taken prisoners. If those unfortunates were these men's families, their children perhaps, then their desperation was certainly warranted, their actions admirable.

Tharman came forward, his soil-stained hand extended. I must admit that the greeting, nervous but sincerely warm, touched me. So often have I been met with taunts and bared weapons! “I have heard of you,” he remarked.

“Then you have the advantage,” I replied politely, grasping his wrist.

Behind him, the sturdy man narrowed his eyes angrily. I was surprised somewhat; my benign remark had apparently injured his pride. Did he think himself a renowned fighter?

Tharman introduced himself, and the tough leader immediately rushed forward to do likewise. “I am Rico,” he declared, coming up to me boldly. “Rico Pengallen of the village Pengallen, fifteen miles to the south and east.” The obvious pride in his voice caused Tharman to wince and set off silent alarms that this Rico might bring trouble when we had caught up with the monsters.

I had heard of Pengallen, though I had only marked it by its evening lights from a distance. According to Bruenor’s maps, the village was no more than a handful of farmhouses. So much for the hopes that any organized militia would soon arrive.

“We were attacked early last night, just after sunset,” Rico continued, roughly nudging the older man aside. “Orcs and ogres, as we’ve said. They took some prisoners.…”

“My wife and son,” Tharman put in, his voice full of anxiety.

“My brother as well,” said another.

I spent a long while considering that grim news, trying to find some consolation I could offer to the desperate men. I did not want their hopes to soar, though, not with ogres and orcs holding their loved ones and with the odds apparently so heavily weighted against us.

“We are less than an hour behind,” I explained. “I had hoped to spot the group before sunset. With Guenhwyvar beside me, though, I can find them night or day.”

“We’re ready for a fight,” Rico declared. It must have been my expression—perhaps it was unintentionally condescending—that he did not like, for he slapped his hammer across his open palm and practically bared his teeth with his ensuing snarl.

“Let us hope it will not come to a fight,” I said. “I have some experience with ogres and with orcs. Neither are overly adept at setting guards.”

“You mean to simply slip in and free our kin?”

Rico’s barely tempered anger continued to surprise me, but when I turned to Tharman for some silent explanation, he only slipped his hands into the folds of his worn traveling cloak and looked away.

“We will do whatever we must to free the prisoners,” I said.

“And to stop the monsters from returning to Pengallen,” Rico added roughly.

“They can be dealt with later,” I replied, trying to convince him to solve one problem at a time. A word to Bruenor would have sent scores of dwarves scouring the region, stubborn and battle-ready warriors who would not have stopped their hunting until the threat had been eliminated.

Rico turned to his four comrades, or, more accurately, he turned away from me. “Guess we’re following a damned drow elf,” he said.

I took no offense. Certainly I had suffered worse treatment than blustery insults, and this desperate band, with the exception of Rico, seemed pleased enough to have found any ally, regardless of the color of my skin.

The enemy camp did not prove difficult to locate. We found it on our side of the river, as twilight settled on the land. Conveniently—or rather, stupidly—the monsters had set a blazing fire to ward off the winter night’s cold.

The light of the bonfire also showed me the layout of the encampment. There were no tents, just the fire and a few scattered logs propped on stones for benches. The land was fairly flat, covered with a bed of river-polished stones and dotted by boulders and an occasional tree or bush. Pig-faced orc sentries were in place north and south of the fire, holding crude, but wicked, weapons in their dirty hands. I assumed that similar guards were posted to the west, away from the river. The prisoners, seeming not too badly injured, huddled together behind the blaze, their backs against a large stone. There were four, not three: the two boys and the farmer’s wife joined by a surprisingly well-dressed goblin. At the time, I didn’t

question the presence of this unexpected addition. I was more concerned with simply finding a way in and a way out.

"The river," I whispered at length. "Guenhwyvar and I can get across it without being seen. We can scout the camp better from the other side."

Rico was thinking the same thing—after a fashion. "You come in from the east, across the river, and we'll hit them hard on this flank."

His scowl widened as I shook my head. This Rico just did not seem able to comprehend that I meant to get the prisoners without an all-out fight.

"I will get at them from across the river with Guenhwyvar beside me," I tried to explain. "But not until the fire has burned low."

"We should go at them while the light is bright," Rico argued. "We aren't like you, drow." He spat the word derisively. "We can't see in the dark."

"But I can," I retorted rather sharply, for Rico was beginning to bother me more than a little. "I can get in, free the prisoners, and strike at the sentries from behind, hopefully without alerting their fellows. If things go well, we will be far from here before the monsters even realize that their prisoners are gone."

Tharman and the other three men were nodding their agreement with the simple plan, but Rico remained stubborn.

"And if things do not go well?"

"Guenhwyvar and I should be able to keep the monsters confused enough so that you and your freed kin can get away. I do not believe that the monsters will even attempt to pursue you, not if they think that their prisoners were stolen by dark elves."

Again I saw Tharman and the others nodding eagerly, and when Rico tried to find a new argument, the older man put a hand firmly on his burly shoulder. Rico shrugged it away, but said nothing more. I did not find much comfort in his silence, not when I looked at the hatred deeply etched on his stubbly face.

Crossing the half-frozen river proved easy enough. Guenhwyvar simply leaped across its width. I followed, picking a careful path along the ice. I did not want to depend wholly upon such a fragile

bridge, though, so I chose a course to the opposite bank that offered the most prominent stones.

My new perspective on the enemy camp from across the river revealed some potential problems—more precisely, the gigantic ogres, standing twice my height. Their skin shone dull and dark in the flickering firelight, prominent warts shining darker, and their long, matted hair gleamed bluish black. There were two at least, squatting amidst a tumble of boulders to the north of the prisoners. The prisoners themselves faced the river, faced me, their backs against the stone, and now I saw another guarding orc, sitting with its back flat against the north face of the same stone. A bared sword lay across its lap. Having often witnessed the brutal tactics of orcs, I figured that this guard was under orders to slip around the stone and slaughter the prisoners if trouble came. That orc presented the most danger, I decided. Its throat would be the first I slit this night.

All that was left for preparation was to sit low and wait for the fire to dim, wait for the camp to grow sleepy with boredom.

Barely half an hour later, angry whispers began to drift to me from across the river—but not from the enemy camp. I could not believe what I was hearing; Rico and the others were arguing! Fortunately, the two orc guards nearest the men's hiding place did not react at once. I could only hope that their ears, not nearly as keen as my own, had not picked up on the slight sound.

Another few moments slipped by, and, thankfully, the voices went silent once more. I did not relax. My instincts warned me that something drastic would soon happen, and Guenhwyvar's low growl confirmed the feeling.

At that critical moment, I did not want to believe that Rico could be so incredibly foolish, but my instincts and warrior senses overruled what my mind refused to believe. I had Taulmaril off my shoulder, an arrow nocked, and searched out again the exact route that would get me quickly across the water.

The two orcs of the southern watch began to shift nervously and converse with each other in their guttural language. I watched them closely, but more closely I kept my attention on the orc nearest the prisoners. I watched the ogres as well, by far the more dangerous

foes. An eight-hundred-pound, ten-foot-tall ogre might not be easily or quickly felled by my scimitars, though a well-aimed strike by Taulmaril could bring one crashing down. Still, my whole plan was predicated on getting the prisoners out without the ogres ever knowing—a battle with those brutes could cost me more time than I, or the prisoners, had to spare.

Then my plan unraveled before my eyes.

One of the orc sentries yelled something. The orc beside him put an arrow into the bushes shielding the farmers. Predictably, the sword-wielding guard was up in an instant, right beside the helpless prisoners. The ogres in the boulder tumble were stirring, but they seemed more curious than alarmed. I still held out some hope that the situation could be salvaged—until I heard Rico's cry for a charge.

There is a time in every battle when a warrior must let go of his conscious thoughts, must let his instincts guide his moves, must trust in those instincts fully and not waste precious time in questioning them. I had only one shot to stop the sword-wielding orc from killing the nearest prisoner, Tharman's wife. The creature's blade was up in the air when I let fly the arrow, its powerful enchantment trailing a silver streak as it flashed across the Surbrin.

I think I got him in the eye, but wherever the missile actually hit, the orc's head was virtually blown apart. The creature flew back into the darkness, and I started across the river, finding what steps I could without taking my attention from the opposite bank.

The orcs nearest the farmers fired their bows again, then drew out weapons for close melee. And though I did not bother to look, I knew that Rico was leading a charge. The three orcs to the north cried out and looked to the river, trying to figure out what had killed their companion. How vulnerable I felt out there, with only emptiness about me, moving slowly as I picked my careful way! Those fears proved valid, for the orcs spotted me almost immediately. I saw their bows come up to fire.

Perhaps the guards could not see me clearly, or perhaps their aim was simply not as good as mine. Whatever the reason, their hasty first shots went wide. I paused in my frantic charge and returned

two arrows of my own; one hit home, its tremendous force throwing the middle orc of the three back and to the ground. I heard an arrow whistle by my ear, just inches away. I think Guenhwyvar, leaping past me, took the next, for I never heard it and, by the luck of the gods, never felt it.

Guenhwyvar hit the bank ahead of me and completely shifted her momentum, sleek muscles pulling hard, bringing the panther about. I had seen Guenhwyvar execute maneuvers like this a hundred times, yet my breath, as always, was stolen away. The cat's flight was directly westward, but as soon as her paws touched down, without a single extra step forward, she cut an incredible pivot to the north and fell upon the archers before they had another arrow out of their quivers.

To my relief, I heard the sounds of battle joined to the south as Rico and the others clashed with the orcs. They had stirred up this hornets' nest. At least they were going to share in the task of putting it right.

I saw the ogres get up then—four, not two—and I let loose another arrow. It got the leading brute in the chest, tearing through the dirty hides the giant wore and burying itself to its silver fletchings. To my amazement and horror the smelly creature continued on for a few steps. Then it fell to its knees, stunned, but not dead. As it slid to the ground, it looked about curiously, as though it had no idea what had stopped its charge.

I had time for one more shot before I reached the bank, and I wanted desperately to kill another ogre. But an orc appeared behind the prisoners, and its evil intentions were obvious as it lifted its cruel sword over the children's heads.

The orc was turned sideways to me. I shot it in the nearest shoulder, the arrow blasting right through to the opposite shoulder. The orc was still alive when it fell to the ground, flopping helplessly with no use of either arm.

It seems strange to me now, but I remember that when I at last made the opposite bank, dropping the bow and drawing my scimitars, I was truly concerned that I might lose Taulmaril. I even thought of the scolding Catti-brie would give to me when I returned

to Mithral Hall without her precious weapon! The images were fleeting, though, a needed diversion until battle was rejoined.

Twinkle, the blade in my right hand, flared an angry blue, aptly reflecting the fires within me. My other scimitar flared bluish white light, a testament to the winter's chill, for the blade would glow only when the air about it was very cold.

The three remaining ogres came at me in no concerted way—whenever I battle such strong but stupid beasts I am reminded of how powerful they would surely be if they could find some order to overrule their natural chaos.

They had erred in their charge, for the lead ogre was too far ahead of its companions. I came in faster than the monster expected, charging low. Twinkle banged hard against one kneecap, and my other blade dug a gash into the opposite thigh as I passed between the huge legs and dived into a headlong roll. The ogre tried to stop abruptly—too abruptly—and it skidded to a jerking halt on the smooth, polished stones.

It fell to a seated position just as I came up to my feet behind it. One does not get many opportunities for so clear a strike at an ogre's head, and I took full advantage, slamming Twinkle hard against the beast's skull, cutting one ear almost exactly in half.

The blow didn't kill the hulking thing, but it was stunned. Before the ogre could recover, I leaped up, caught a foothold on its shoulder, and sprang off, soaring straight for the next brute's face. The move caught this second ogre by complete surprise. Its formidable club was postured for a low defense. It couldn't possibly get the heavy weapon up in time to block.

Twinkle slashed across the side of the ogre's thick neck as my other blade bit into its cheek, tearing away the skin so that the monster's black teeth gleamed in the starlight. Neither wound was mortal, though, and I feared that I was in serious trouble when the monster wrapped its free arm around my back, pulling me in tight against its massive chest. Fortunately, my right arm was angled so that I managed to pull back Twinkle and get the scimitar's point in line. I drove in with all my strength, knowing that I needed a quick kill, for my sake and for the sake of the helpless prisoners.

The magical blade slipped through the ogre flesh, nicking off a rib that must have been as thick as a fair-sized tree trunk, and then probed deeper. I actually felt the throbbing as Twinkle found the ogre's heart, the violent pumping nearly pulling the scimitar's hilt from my grasp.

I'd needed the quick kill, and I got it. The ogre gasped once, and we tumbled together to the ground. I was away in an instant, the dying ogre taking the club hit its remaining companion had intended for me.

The battle was far from won, though. This last standing ogre crouched low, poised and ready. Even worse, both the brute I had shot with the arrow and the one whose ear I had split were not dead. Stubbornly, they were trying to rise, to get themselves back into the battle.

I took some comfort when Guenhwyvar raced past me again, right between me and my newest opponent. I thought the cat was going to finish one of the wounded ogres, but Guenhwyvar went right past the struggling monsters and leaped over the terrified, huddled prisoners. I understood why when I heard the twang of bows; the orc guards from the west had arrived. There came a thunderous roar, followed, predictably, by terrified screams.

It would take more than a few orcish arrows to slow mighty Guenhwyvar.

I noticed, too, when I glanced to the side, that the goblin prisoner was up and running, fleeing into the night. I took little note of the creature, having no idea then of how profoundly this particular goblin would affect my life.

All thoughts of cowardly goblins disappeared as the unwounded ogre drew me back into the battle. It got in the first swing, the first two or three, actually. I kept on the defensive, picking my openings carefully. As I expected, the ogre's frustration mounted with every miss. Its attacks grew more wild, more open to counters. I had hit the brute four times, cutting painful, if not too serious, wounds in its hide, when I noticed the ogre with the split ear starting to rise.

My opponent swung again and again, forcing me to dodge. I rushed in for a quick and furious flurry of stinging strikes, pushing

him back on the heels of his huge feet. Then I turned and rushed the groggy ogre. The beast lifted its great club pitifully, hardly having recovered the strength to line up the weapon at all. Its swing was slow and clumsy, and I easily stepped back out of danger. I followed the club in on its follow-through, slashing wildly with both scimitars. How many lines of blood I drew on that ogre's face, I do not know. In barely an instant, the monster's features all seemed lost in a gory mass.

I scanned the camp as the huge corpse fell away, and was heartened, for the ogre with the arrow in its chest had given up the fight, had given up everything. It lay facedown, so very still that I knew it was dead.

That left only the one behind me, slightly wounded. I knew I could beat any ogre in an even fight, knew that it would never get close to hitting me if I kept my concentration absolute. Always eager to battle such vile creatures, I admit an instant of regret when I turned around and found that the ogre had run off into the night.

The tinge of regret disappeared when I remembered the prisoners. To my relief, the orcs in the south had been defeated by the five farmers, with only one of the men, the youngest, showing any wounds at all. Rico wore a smug expression, one I dearly wanted to pound from the boastful man's face.

Guenhwyvar came trotting back into the camp a moment later at an easy gait, the western area secured. The panther showed a couple of small wounds from orcish arrows, but nothing serious. Thus the fight ended, three ogres and eight orcs dead, another ogre and perhaps a half-dozen orcs fleeing into the night. A complete victory, for not a single companion had been slain.

Still, I could not help but consider that this battle needn't have happened at all. Any thoughts I held of berating Rico did not remain for long, though, not with the ensuing greetings between Tharman and his family, between another of the farmers and his lost younger brother.

"Where is Nojheim?" Rico demanded. His callous tone surprised me. If he'd lost some kin, a child or a sibling, I would have expected

sorrow. But I heard no sorrow behind the man's question, only a desperate anger, as though he had been insulted.

The farmers exchanged confused glances, with all gazes finally coming to rest on me.

"Who is Nojheim?" I asked.

"A goblin," Tharman explained.

"There was a goblin among the prisoners," I told them. "He slipped out during the fight, heading northwest."

"Then we go on," Rico said without the slightest hesitation, without the slightest regard for the beleaguered prisoners. I thought his request absurd; could a single goblin be worth the pains of the woman and boys who had gone through such trials?

"The night grows long," I said to him, my tone far from congenial. "Bring the fire back up and tend to your wounded. I will go after the missing goblin."

"I want him back!" Rico growled. He must have understood my confused and fast-angering expression, for he calmed suddenly and tried to explain.

"Nojheim led a group of goblins that attacked Pengallen several weeks ago," he said, and glanced around at the others. "The goblin is a leader, and will likely return with allies. We were holding him for trial when the newest raiders came."

I had no reason not to take Rico's claims at face value—except that it seemed odd to me that farmers of the small village, so often besieged by the many monsters of the wild region, would go to the trouble of holding a trial for the sake of a goblin. The hesitating (or was it fearful?) expressions of those other farmers, particularly of Tharman, also gave me pause, but I dismissed their apparent reservations as fear that Nojheim would return with a sizable force behind him and lay waste to their vulnerable village.

"I am in no hurry to get to Silverymoon," I assured them. "I will capture Nojheim and return him to Pengallen on the morrow." I started off, but Rico grabbed my shoulder and turned me about to face him.

"Alive," he snarled. I did not like the sound of it. I have never held any reservations about dealing harsh justice to goblins, but Rico's

cruel tone seemed to tell of a thirst for vengeance. Still, I had no reason to doubt the burly farmer, no reason to argue against the accepted code of justice of Pengallen. Guenhwyvar and I were away in a moment, tracking to the northwest, easily finding the trail of the fleeing Nojheim.

The chase took longer than I'd expected. We found the tracks of some orc stragglers crossing those of Nojheim, and I decided it to be more important to prevent the orcs from getting back to their lair, where they might find some reinforcements. We found them, just three, a short while later. Using the Heartseeker, so marvelous a bow, I finished the beasts from a distance in a matter of three quick shots.

Then Guenhwyvar and I had to backtrack, rejoin Nojheim's trail, and head off into the darkness once more. Nojheim proved to be an intelligent adversary, which was consistent with Rico's claim that he was a leader among his wretched race. The goblin doubled back constantly and climbed among the wide-spread branches of several trees, coming down far from his original trail and heading in an altered direction. Ultimately, he made for the river, the one barrier that might defeat pursuit.

It took all my training as a ranger and all the help of Guenhwyvar's feline senses to close ground before the goblin got across to safety. I admit in all honesty that if Nojheim had not been so weary from his ordeal at the hands of the merciless raiders, he might have eluded us altogether.

When we at last reached the riverbank, I used my innate ability—common to the Underdark races—to view objects by their emanating heat, not their reflected light. I soon spotted the warm glow of a form inching across a rock walkway, picking his strides carefully. Not trusting the obvious limitations of infravision, where shapes are indistinct and details revealed only as patterns of heat, I lifted Taulmaril and loosed a streaking arrow. It skipped off a stone and hit the water just a few feet ahead of the goblin, making him slip one leg hip-deep into the icy flow. The lightninglike flash of silver left no doubt as to the goblin's identity. I rushed for the stone crossing.

Guenhwyvar flew by me. I was halfway across the bridge, running as swiftly as I dared, when I heard the panther growl from the darkness beyond, heard the goblin cry out in distress. “Hold, Guenhwyvar!” I called out, not wanting the panther to tear the creature apart.

The slight, yellow-skinned Nojheim was on the ground, pinned by huge paws, when I caught up to them. I ordered Guenhwyvar back, and even as the panther moved away, Nojheim rolled about and grabbed for my boot with his long, spindly arms, his hands still showing the remnants of torn leather bindings.

I nearly slammed him with the butt of my scimitar, but before I could react, I found the pitiful Nojheim slobbering kisses all over my boots.

“Please, my good master,” he whined in his annoying, high-pitched voice, so typical of goblins. “Please, oh, please! Nojheim not run. Nojheim scared, scared of big, ugly ogres with big clubs. Nojheim scared.”

It took me a few moments to recover my wits. Then I hoisted the goblin to his feet and ordered him to be silent. Standing there, looking down into Nojheim’s ugly, flat face and sloping forehead, his gleaming yellow eyes and squashed nose, it took all of my control to hold back my weapons. I am a ranger, a protector of the goodly races from the many evil races of Faerûn, and among those evil races, I name goblins as my most hated enemy.

“Please,” he repeated pitifully.

I slid my weapons away, and Nojheim’s wide mouth stretched with a strained smile, showing his many small but sharp teeth.

It was nearly dawn by this time and I wanted to be off right away for Pengallen, but Nojheim was half-frozen from his stumble into the river. I could see by his crooked stance that the goblin’s drenched leg had little or no feeling in it.

As I have said, I hold no love for goblins and normally offer them no mercy. If Nojheim had precipitated a raid on my own community, I would have put a second arrow in the air before he had ever lifted his leg from the river, ending the whole affair. But I

was bound now by my oath to the farmers, and so I set a blazing fire, allowing the goblin to warm up his numbed limb.

Nojheim's actions when I had first caught him continued to bother me, continued to raise quandaries in my mind. I questioned him early the next morning, after I had released Guenhwyvar back to rest on the Astral Plane. The goblin would say nothing. He just took on a resigned expression and looked away from me whenever I tried to address him. So be it, I told myself. It was not my concern.

Later that afternoon, we arrived in Pengallen, a cluster of about a dozen one-story wooden houses set in the middle of a flat field cleared of the common trees and surrounded by a high picket wall. The others had come in a few hours earlier, and Rico had apparently warned the two gate guards manning the village wall of my impending approach. They did not immediately allow me entry, though they were far from inhospitable, and so I waited. Rico was there in a few moments. Apparently he had left word that he should be summoned when I arrived.

The burly man's expression had changed much from the previous night. No longer was his square jaw set in a grimace, revealing Rico's happiness at the turn of events. Even his wide-set blue eyes seemed to smile as he regarded me and my prisoner, all the lines on his ruddy face tilting upward.

"You've been generous with your aid," he said to me, looping a rope about Nojheim's neck the way some in crowded villages leash their dogs. "I know that you have business in Silverymoon, so let me give you my assurance that all is well in Pengallen once more."

I had the distinct feeling that I had just been summarily dismissed.

"Please take a meal at our inn," Rico quickly added, motioning for me to go through the now-open gate. Had my confusion been that obvious? "A meal and a drink," he added cheerfully. "Tell the barkeep, Aganis, that I will pay."

My intention had been to deliver the prisoner and head off at once, trying to get a good start on my way to Silverymoon. I was eager to see the wondrous city on the River Rauvin, to walk freely with the blessings of the ruling lady along the marvelous curving boulevards, to visit the many museums and the unparalleled library.

My instincts told me to go in for that meal, though. Something about this whole scenario wasn't quite right.

Aganis, a barrel-shaped, thick-bearded, and oft-smiling man, was indeed surprised to see the likes of a dark elf enter his establishment, a larger two-story building set in the middle of the village's back wall. The place served as inn, trading post, and a variety of other public functions. As soon as he got over his initial reaction—I suppose that terror-stricken is the only word to properly describe his expression—he became quite anxious to please me, at least, judging from the large portions he set before me, portions far larger than those of a farmer sitting not so far down the end of the bar.

I let the obvious pandering go without comment. It had been a long night and I was hungry.

"So you're Drizzit Do'Urden?" the farmer at the end of the bar asked. He was an older man with thinning gray hair and a wizened face that had seen countless days under the sun.

Aganis blanched at the question. Did he think I would take offense and tear apart his place of business?

"Drizzt," I corrected, looking to the man.

"Jak Timberline," the man said. He extended his hand, then retracted it and wiped it on his shirt before putting it back out. "I've heard of you, Drizzt." He took extra care to pronounce the name correctly, and I'll admit, I was flattered. "They say you're a ranger."

I accepted the shake firmly, and my smile was wide, I am sure.

"I'll tell you right here, Drizzt—" again, the extra care with the name "—I don't care what color a fellow's skin might be. I heard of you, heard good things about what you and your friends've done up in Mithral Hall."

His compliment was a bit condescending, and poor Aganis blanched again. I took no offense, though, accepting Jak's clumsiness as inexperience. The greeting was actually quite tactful, weighed against so many others I have received since I came to the surface world—so many others that took place at the end of a drawn weapon.

“It is a good thing that the dwarves have reclaimed the halls,” I agreed.

“And a good thing, too, that you happened by Rico’s group,” Jak added.

“Tharman was a happy soul this morning,” put in the nervous barkeep.

It seemed so normal to me, and you have to understand that I was used to anything but normal in my dealings with the various surface races.

“Did you get Rico back his slave?” Jak asked bluntly.

My last bite of food suddenly refused to go down my throat.

“Nojheim,” Jak explained. “The goblin.”

I had seen slavery in all its brutality in Menzoberranzan, the city of my birth. Dark elves kept many slaves of many races, working them brutally until they were no longer useful, then torturing them, butchering them, breaking their bodies as they had broken their spirits. I had always felt slavery to be the most repulsive of acts, even when practiced against the so-called unredeemable races, such as goblins and orcs.

I nodded in answer to Jak, but my sudden grimace put the man off. Aganis nervously cleaned the same plate several times, all the while staring at me and occasionally putting his towel up to wipe his sweaty brow.

I finished the meal without much more conversation, except to innocently discover which farmhouse belonged to Rico. I wanted no answers from these two. I wanted to see for myself what I had done.

I was outside Rico’s fenced-in yard by dusk. The farmhouse was a simple structure of boards and logs, mud patted in against the cracks to keep the wind out and a roof angled to handle the winter snows. Nojheim was going about his chores—unshackled, I noticed—but no one else was in sight. I did see the curtains of the single window on this side of the farmhouse move a few times. Rico, or one of his family, was probably keeping an eye out for the goblin.

When he was done tending to a goat tied near the house, Nojheim considered the darkening sky and went into the small barn, barely more than a shed, a short distance from the house. Through the

many cracks of this rough structure, I saw the light of a fire come up a moment later.

What was this all about? I could not reconcile any of it. If Nojheim had initially come to Pengallen at the head of a raiding force, then why was he allowed such freedom? He could have taken a brand from that fire he had burning in the barn and set the main house ablaze.

I decided not to get my answers from Rico—decided, since I knew in my heart what was going on, that I would get no honest answers from him.

Nojheim went into his pitiful slobbering as soon as I walked into the shadows of the dimly lit barn.

"Please, oh, please," he whined in his squeaky goblin voice, his fat tongue smacking against his lips.

I pushed him away, and my anger must have been obvious, for he suddenly sat quietly across the fire from me, staring into the orange and yellow flames.

"Why did you not tell me?"

He glanced up at me curiously, his expression a clear image of resignation.

"Did you lead a raid against Pengallen?" I pressed.

He looked back to the flames, his face twisted incredulously as though that question should not even be justified with an answer. And I believed him.

"Then why?" I demanded, shifting over to grab his shoulder and force him to look me in the eye. "Why did you not tell me Rico's reason for wanting you back?"

"Tell you?" he balked. His goblin accent had suddenly flown. "A goblin tell Drizzt Do'Urden of his plight? A goblin appeal to a ranger for compassion?"

"You know my name?" By the gods, he even pronounced it correctly.

"I have heard great tales of Drizzt Do'Urden, and of Bruenor Battlehammer and the fight to reclaim Mithral Hall," he replied, and again, his command of the proper inflections of the language was astounding. "It is common talk among the farmers of the lower

valleys, all of them hoping that the new dwarf king will prove generous with his abundant wealth."

I sat back from him. He just continued to stare blankly at the flames, his eyes lowered. I do not know exactly how much time passed in silence. I do not even know what I was thinking.

Nojheim was perceptive, though. He knew.

"I accept my fate," he replied to my unspoken question, though there was little conviction in his voice.

"You are no ordinary goblin."

Nojheim spat on the fire. "I do not know that I'm a goblin at all," he answered. If I had been eating at the time, I surely would have choked once more.

"I am like no goblin I've ever met," he explained with a hopeless chuckle. Always resigned, I thought, so typical of his helpless predicament. "Even my mother … she murdered my father and my younger sister." He snapped his fingers to mock his next point, to accentuate the sarcasm in his voice. "They deserved it, by goblin standards, for they hadn't properly shared their supper with her."

Nojheim went silent and shook his head. Physically, he was indeed a goblin, but I could tell already by the sincerity of his tone that he was far different in temperament from his wicked kin. The thought shook me more than a little. In my years as a ranger, I had never stopped to question my actions against goblins, never held back my scimitars long enough to determine if any of them might possibly be of a different demeanor than I had come to know as typical of the normally evil creatures.

"You should have told me that you were a slave," I said again.

"I'm not proud of that fact."

"Why do you sit in here?" I demanded, though I knew the answer immediately. I, too, had once been a slave, a captive of wicked mind flayers, among the most evil of the Underdark's denizens. There is no condition so crippling, no torment so profound. In my homeland, I had seen a contingent of a hundred orcs held under complete control by no more than six drow soldiers. If they had mustered a common courage, those orcs could surely have destroyed their

keepers. But while courage is not the first thing to be stripped from a slave, it is certainly among the most important.

"You do not deserve this fate," I said more softly.

"What do you know of it?" Nojheim demanded.

"I know that it is wrong," I said. "I know that something should be done."

"I know that I would be hung by my neck if I tried to break free," he said bluntly. "I have never done any harm to any person or any thing. Neither do I desire to harm anyone. But, this is my lot in life."

"We are not bound by our race," I told him, finding some conviction finally in remembering my own long trail from the dark ways of Menzoberranzan. "You said that you have heard tales of me. Are they what you might expect of a dark elf?"

"You are drow, not goblin," he said, as if that fact explained everything.

"By your own words, you are no more akin to goblins than I am to drow," I reminded him.

"Who can tell?" he replied with a shrug, a helpless gesture that pained me deeply. "Am I to tell Rico that I am not a goblin in heart and action, just a victim of merciless fate? Do you think that he would believe me? Do you think that sort of understanding is within the grasp of these simple farmer folk?"

"Are you afraid to try?" I asked him.

"Yes!" His intensity was surprising. "I'm not Rico's first slave," he said. "He's held goblins, orcs, even a bugbear once. He enjoys forcing others to do his own work, you see. Yet, how many of these other slaves did you see when you came into Rico's compound, Drizzt Do'Urden?"

He knew that I had not seen any, and I was not surprised by his explanation. I was beginning to hate this Rico Pengallen more than a little.

"Rico finished with them," Nojheim went on. "They lost their ability to survive. They lost their usefulness. Did you notice the high cross-pole beside the front gate?"

I shuddered when I pictured what use that cross-pole might have been put to.

“I’m alive, and I’ll stay alive,” Nojheim declared. Then, for the first time, the determined goblin allowed his guard to slip down, his sullen expression betraying his words.

“You wish that the raiding ogres would have killed you,” I said to him, and he offered no argument.

For some time we sat in silence, silence that weighed heavily on both of us. I knew that I could not let this injustice stand, could not turn my back on one—even a goblin—who so obviously needed help. I considered the courses open to me and came to the conclusion that to truly remedy this injustice, I must use what influence I could. Like most of the farming villages in the region, Pengallen was not an independent community. The people here were within the general protection of, and therefore, under the overseeing law of the greater cities nearby. I could appeal to Alustriel, who ruled Silverymoon, and to Bruenor Battlehammer, the nearest king and my dearest friend.

“Perhaps some day I will find the strength to stand against Rico,” Nojheim said unexpectedly, pulling me from my contemplations. I remember his next words vividly. “I am not a courageous goblin. I prefer to live, though oftentimes I wonder what my life is truly worth.”

My father could have said those very words. My father, Zak’nafein, too, was a slave, though a slave of a different sort. Zak’nafein lived well in Menzoberranzan, but he detested the dark elves and their evil ways. He saw no escape, though, no way out of the drow city. For lack of courage, he lived his life as a drow warrior, survived by following those same codes that were so abhorrent to him.

I tried to remind Nojheim again that I had escaped a similar fate, that I had walked out of a desperate situation. I explained that I had traveled among peoples who surely hated me and feared me for the reputation of my heritage.

“You are drow, not any goblin,” he replied again, and this time I began to understand the meaning behind his words. “They will never understand that I am not evil in heart, as are other goblins. I don’t even understand it!”

“But you believe it,” I said firmly.

“Am I to tell them that this goblin is not an evil sort?”

“Exactly that!” I argued. It seemed reasonable enough to me. I thought that I had found the opening I needed.

Nojheim promptly closed that door, promptly taught me something about myself and about the world that I had not previously considered.

“What is the difference between us?” I pressed, hoping he would see my understanding of the truth.

“You think yourself persecuted?” the goblin asked. His yellow eyes narrowed, and I knew that he thought he was being shrewd.

“I no longer accept that definition, just as I no longer accept the persecution,” I declared. My pride had suddenly got in the way of understanding what this pitiful wretch was getting at. “People will draw their own judgments, but I will no longer accept their unfair conclusions.”

“You will fight those that do you wrong?” Nojheim asked.

“I will deny them, ignore them, and know in my heart that I am right in my beliefs.”

Nojheim’s smile revealed both an honest happiness that I had found my way, and a deeper sorrow—for himself, I came to know.

“Our situations are not the same,” he insisted. I started to protest, but he stopped me with an upraised hand. “You are drow, exotic, beyond the experiences of the vast majority of people you meet.”

“Almost everyone of the surface has heard horrible tales of the drow,” I tried to reason.

“But they have not dealt directly with drow elves!” Nojheim replied sharply. “You are an oddity to them, strangely beautiful, even by their own standards of beauty. Your features are fine, Drizzt Do’Urden, your eyes penetrating. Even your skin, so black and lustrous, must be considered beautiful by the people of the surface world. I am a goblin, an ugly goblin, in body if not in spirit.”

“If you showed them the truth of that spirit …”

Nojheim’s laughter mocked my concern. “Showed them the truth? A truth that would make them question what they had known all of their lives? Am I to be a dark mirror of their conscience? These people, Rico included, have killed many goblins—probably rightly

so," he quickly added, and that clarification explained to me everything Nojheim had been trying to get through my blind eyes.

If these farmers, many of whom had often battled goblins, and others who had kept goblins as slaves, found just one creature who did not fit into their definitions of the evil race, just one goblin who showed conscience and compassion, intellect and a spirit akin to their own, it might throw their whole existence into chaos. I, myself, felt as though I had been slapped in the face when I'd learned of Nojheim's true demeanor. Only through my own experiences with my dark elven kin, the overwhelming majority of whom well deserved their evil reputation, was I able to work through that initial turmoil and guilt.

These farmers, though, might not so easily understand Nojheim. They would surely fear him, hate him all the more.

"I am not a courageous being," Nojheim said again, and though I disagreed, I held that thought private.

"You will leave with me," I told him. "This night. We will go back to the west, to Mithral Hall."

"No!"

I looked at him, more hurt than confused.

"I'll not be hunted again," he explained, and I guessed from the faraway, pained look he gave me that he was remembering the first time Rico had chased him down.

I could not force Nojheim to comply, but I could not allow this injustice to stand. Was I to openly confront Rico? There were implications, potentially grave, to that course. I knew not what greater powers Pengallen held fealty to. If this village was sponsored by a city not known for tolerance, such as Nesme, to the south and west, then any action I took against its citizens could force trouble between that city and Mithral Hall, since I was, in effect, an emissary of Bruenor Battlehammer.

And so I left Nojheim. In the morning I secured the use of a fine horse and took the only route left open to me. I would go to Silverymoon first, I decided, since Alustriel was among the most respected rulers in all the land. Then, if need be, I would appeal to Bruenor's strong sense of justice.

I also decided then and there that if neither Alustriel nor Bruenor would act on Nojheim's behalf, I would take the matter unto myself —whatever the cost.

It took me three days of hard riding to get to Silverymoon. The greeting at the Moorgate, on the city's western side, was uncommonly polite, the guards welcoming me with all the blessings of Lady Alustriel. It was Alustriel that I needed to see, I told them, and they replied that the Lady of Silverymoon was out of the city, on business with Sundabar, to the east. She would not return for a fortnight.

I could not wait, and so I bade the guards farewell, explaining that I would return within a tenday or two. Then I set off, back the way I had come. Bruenor would have to act.

The return ride was both exhilarating and tormenting to me. The greeting at Silverymoon, so different from what I had come to expect, had given me an almost giddy hope that the wrongs of the world could be defeated. At the same time, I felt as though I had abandoned Nojheim, felt as if my desire to follow proper etiquette was a cowardly course. I should have insisted that the goblin accompany me, should have taken Nojheim from his pain and then tried to mend the situation diplomatically.

I have made mistakes in my life, as I knew I had made one here. I veered back toward Pengallen instead of traveling straight to Bruenor's court at Mithral Hall.

I found Nojheim hanging from Rico's high cross-pole.

There are events forever frozen in my memory, feelings that exude a more complete aura, a memory vivid and lasting. I remember the wind at that horrible moment. The day, thick with low clouds, was unseasonably warm, but the wind, on those occasions it had to gust, carried a chilling bite, coming down from the high mountains and carrying the sting of deep snow with it. That wind was behind me, my thick and long white hair blowing around my face, my cloak pressing tightly against my back as I sat on my mount and stared helplessly at the high cross-pole.

The gusty breeze also kept Nojheim's stiff and bloated body turning slightly, the bolt holding the hemp rope creaking in

mournful, helpless, protest.

I will see him that way forever.

I had not even moved to cut the poor goblin down when Rico and several of his rugged cohorts, all armed, came out of the house to meet me—to challenge me, I believed. Beside them came Tharman, carrying no weapon, his expression forlorn.

"Damned goblin tried to kill me," Rico explained, and for a fleeting moment, I believed him, feared that I had compelled Nojheim to make a fateful error. As Rico continued, though, claiming that the goblin had attacked him in broad daylight, before a dozen witnesses, I came to realize that it was all an elaborate lie. The witnesses were no more than partners in an unjust conspiracy.

"No reason to get upset," Rico went on, and his smug smile answered all my questions about the murder. "I've killed many goblins," he quickly added, his accent changing slightly, "probably rightly so, too."

Why had Rico hedged by using the word "probably"? Then I realized that I had heard those exact words spoken before, in exactly the same manner. I'd heard Nojheim say them, and, obviously, Rico had also heard! The fears the goblin had expressed that night in the barn suddenly rang ominously true.

I wanted to draw my scimitars and leap from the horse, cut Rico down and drive away any that would stand to help this murderer.

Tharman looked at me, looked right through my intentions, and shook his head, silently reminding me that there was nothing my weapons could do that would do anybody, Nojheim included, any good.

Rico went on talking, but I no longer listened. What recourse did I have? I could not expect Alustriel, or even Bruenor, to take any action against Rico. Nojheim, by all accounts, was simply a goblin, and even if I could somehow prove differently, could convince Alustriel or Bruenor that this goblin was a peaceful sort and unjustly persecuted, they would not be able to act. Intent is the determining factor of crime, and to Rico and the people of Pengallen, Nojheim, for all my claims, remained only a goblin. No court of justice in the region, where bloody battles with goblins are still commonplace,

where almost everyone has lost at least one of his or her kin to such creatures, could find these men guilty for hanging Nojheim, for hanging a monster.

I had helped to perpetrate the incident. I had recaptured Nojheim and returned him to wicked Rico—even when I had sensed that something was amiss. And then I had forced myself into the goblin's life once more, had spoken dangerous thoughts to him.

Rico was still talking when I slid down from my borrowed mount, looped Taulmaril over my shoulder, and walked off for Mithral Hall.



Sunset. Another day surrenders to the night as I perch here on the side of a mountain, not so far from Mithral Hall.

The mystery of the night has begun, but does Nojheim know now the truth of a greater mystery? I often wonder of those who have gone before me, who have discovered what I cannot until the time of my own death. Is Nojheim better off now than he was as Rico's slave?

If the afterlife is one of justice, then surely he is.

I must believe this to be true, yet it still wounds me to know that I played a role in the unusual goblin's death, both in capturing him and in going to him later, going to him with hopes that he could not afford to hold. I cannot forget that I walked away from Nojheim, however well-intentioned I might have been. I rode for Silverymoon and left him vulnerable, left him in wrongful pain.

And so I learn from my mistake.

Forever after, I will not ignore such injustice. If I chance upon one of Nojheim's spirit and Nojheim's peril again, then let his wicked master be wary. Let the lawful powers of the region review my actions and exonerate me if that is what they perceive to be the correct course. If not …

It does not matter. I will follow my heart.

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THE THIRD LEVEL

Artemis Entreri fascinates me. He started as a foil to Drizzt, an afterthought in the epilogue of *The Crystal Shard*. As he developed in the second book, I came to see him as a reflection for Drizzt, and one in a dark mirror (with apologies to the title of the previous story). Throughout the early books, I viewed Entreri through Drizzt's eyes. I wanted Drizzt to come to know the assassin as who he, Drizzt, might have become had he remained in Menzoberranzan. The scenes in *Streams of Silver* with Drizzt and Entreri fighting side by side in Mithral Hall, and the fights between them in *The Half-ling's Gem*, and particularly in *The Legacy* remain some of my favorite scenes in all the books.

Somewhere along the line, Artemis Entreri stepped out from his role to become something far more important to me, yet another examination of another aspect of what it is to be a rational, mortal being. I think I realized it in 1991, when writing *Homeland*, a book that didn't include Entreri (he wasn't yet born in the timeline of the Realms). At this time, TSR had just moved to AD&D 2nd Edition, a version that purposely excluded assassins. I got a call from Jeff Grubb, the coordinator of the Realms, in which he graciously offered me the opportunity to kill Entreri so that the game designers wouldn't have to, as all assassins were having their souls sucked out by an evil god—this was the Realms' way of explaining the changes in the game. After a half-hour argument in which I insisted that I wasn't killing Entreri, and neither was TSR, I had an epiphany.

"I don't understand why he has to go," I argued.

“Because there are no assassins in the Realms in 2nd Edition!” Jeff shot back for the one-hundredth time.

“He’s not an assassin,” I insisted, and when an obviously surprised Jeff didn’t respond, I added, “he’s a fighter-thief who takes money to kill people.”

After another pause, Jeff said, “We can do that!”

As soon as I hung up the phone, I was struck by how forcibly I had defended Entreri. He wasn’t just another villain to me; he had become an important character, far beyond his relationship with Drizzt. It’s no mystery to me why many of the stories in this anthology center on him, and in this one, “The Third Level,” I wanted to find out why. Why had this man failed where Drizzt had succeeded? Why had this man become a victim of his wretched surroundings? In writing this story, I came to see Entreri as amoral, and not immoral, an emotionally shut-down man surviving in a world he knows only as vile. We know that, typically, criminals come from somewhere—somewhere bad. There are thousands of books and millions of therapy hours dedicated to unlocking the dark past that can lead a person to some dark actions. And so it must be for Artemis Entreri.





The young man's dark eyes shifted from side to side, always moving, always alert. He caught a movement to the left, between two ramshackle wood-and-clay huts.

Just a child at play, wisely taking to the shadows.

Back to the right, he noticed a woman deep in the recesses beyond a window that was just a hole in the wall, for no one in this section of Calimport was wealthy enough to afford glass. The woman stayed back, standing perfectly still, watching him and unaware that he, in turn, watched her.

He felt like a hunting cat crossing the plain, she just another of the many deer, hoping he would take no notice.

Young Artemis Entreri liked that feeling, that power. He had worked this street—if that's what it could be called, for it was little more than a haphazard cluster of unremarkable shacks dropped across a field of cart-torn mud—for more than five years, since he was but a boy of nine.

He stopped and slowly turned toward the window, and the woman shrank away at the merest hint of a threat.

Entreri smiled and resumed his surveying. This was his street, he told himself, a place he had staked out three months after his arrival in Calimport. The place had no formal name, but now, because of him, it had an identity. It was the area where Artemis Entreri was boss.

How far he had come in five years, hitching a ride all the way from the city of Memnon. Entreri chuckled at the term "all the way." In truth, Memnon was the closest city to Calimport, but in the barren desert land of Calimshan, even the closest city was a long and difficult ride.

Difficult to be sure, but Entreri had made it, had survived, despite the brutal duties the merchants of that caravan had given him, despite the determined advances of one lecherous old man, a smelly unshaven lout who seemed to think that a nine-year-old boy—

Entreri shook that memory from his head, refusing to follow its inevitable course. He had survived the caravan trek and had stolen away from the merchants on the second day in Calimport, soon after he had learned that they had taken him along ultimately to sell him into slavery.

There was no need to remember anything before that, the teenager told himself, neither the journey from Memnon, nor the horrors before the journey that had sent him running from home. Still, he could smell the breath of that lecherous old man, like the breath of his own father, and his uncle.

The pain pushed him back to his angry edge, made him steel his dark eyes and tighten the honed muscles along his arms. He had made it. That was all that counted. This was his street, a place of safety, where no one threatened him.

Entreri resumed his surveillance of his domain, his eyes scanning left to right, then back across the way. He saw every movement and every shadow—always the hunting cat, looking more for prey than for danger.

He couldn't help but chuckle self-deprecatingly at the grandeur of his "kingdom." His street? Only because no other thief would bother to claim it. Entreri could work six days rolling every one of the many drunks who fell down in the mud in this impoverished section and barely scrape enough coins together to eat a decent meal on the seventh.

Still, that was enough for the waif who had fled his home; it had sustained him and given him back his pride over the past five years. Now he was a young man, fourteen years old—or almost fourteen. Entreri didn't remember his exact birthdate, just that there had been a brief period right before the even briefer season of rain, when times in his house were not so terrible.

Again, the young man shook the unwanted memories from his head. He was fourteen, he decided; as if in confirmation, he looked

down at his finely toned, lithe frame, barely a hundred and thirty pounds, but with tightened muscles covering every inch. He was fourteen, and he was rightly proud, because he had survived and he had thrived. He surveyed his street, his domain, and his smallish chest expanded. Even the old drunks were afraid of him, showed him proper respect when they addressed him.

He had earned it, and everybody in this little shanty town within the city of Calimport—a city that was nothing more than a collection of a thousand or more little shanty towns huddled about the white marble and gold-laced structures of the wealthy merchants—respected him, feared him.

Everybody except one.

The new tough, a young man probably three or four years older than Entreri, had arrived earlier in the tenday. He did not ask permission of Entreri before he began rolling the wretches in the mud, or even walking into homes in broad daylight and terrorizing whoever was inside. The stranger forced Entreri's subjects into making him a meal, or into offering him whatever other niceties could be found.

That was the part that angered Entreri more than anything. Entreri held no love, no respect, for the common folk of his carved-out kingdom, but he had seen the newcomer's type before—in both his horrid past and in his troubled nightmares. In truth, there was room on Entreri's street for two thugs. In the five days that the new tough had been about, he and Entreri hadn't even seen each other. And certainly none of Entreri's wretched informants had asked for protection against this new terror. None of them would dare even to speak with Entreri unless he asked them a direct question.

But there remained the not-inconsiderable matter of pride.

Entreri peered around the shack's corner, down the muddy lane. "Right on schedule," he whispered as the newcomer strolled onto the other end of this relatively straight section of road. "Predictable." Entreri curled his lip up, thinking that predictability was indeed a weakness. He would have to remember that.

The new thug's eyes were dark, his hair, like Entreri's, black as the waters of the Kandad Oasis, so black that every other color seemed

to be mixed together in its depths. A native-born Calimshite, Entreri decided, probably a man not unlike himself.

What tortured past had put the invader on this street? he mused. There is no room for that kind of empathy, Entreri scolded himself. Compassion gets you killed.

With a deep, steadying breath, Entreri steeled his gaze once more and watched coldly as the invader threw a staggering old man to the ground and tore open the wretch's threadbare purse. Apparently unsatisfied with the meager take, the young man yanked a half-rotted board from the uneven edge of the nearest shack and whacked his pitiful victim across the forehead. The old man whined and pleaded, but the tough struck him again, flattening his nose. He was on his knees, face covered in bright blood, begging and crying, but got hit again and again until his sobs were muffled by the mud that half-buried his broken face.

Entreri found that he cared nothing for the old wretch. He did care, though, that the man had begged this newcomer, had pleaded with a master who had come uninvited to Artemis Entreri's place.

Entreri's hands went down to his pockets, slipped inside, feeling the only weapons he bothered to carry, two small handfuls of sand and a flat, edged rock. He gave a sigh that reflected both resignation and the tingling excitement of impending battle. He started out from the corner, but paused to consider his own feelings. He was the hunting cat, the master here, so he was rightfully defending his carved-out domain. But there remained a sadness Entreri could not deny, a resignation he could not understand.

Somewhere deep inside him, in a pocket sealed away by the horrors he had known, Entreri knew things should not be like this. Yet the realization did not turn him away from the battle to come. Instead, it made him even angrier.

A feral growl escaped Entreri's lips as he stepped around the shack, out into the open and right in the path of the approaching thug.

The older boy stopped, likewise regarding his adversary. He knew of Entreri, of course, the same way Entreri knew of him.

“At last you show yourself openly,” the newcomer said confidently. He was bigger than slender Entreri, though there was very little extra weight on his warrior’s frame. His shoulders had been broadened by maturity, by an extra few years of a hard life. His muscles, though not so thick, twitched like strong cords.

“I have been looking for you,” he said, inching closer. His caution tipped observant Entreri that he was more nervous than his bravado revealed.

“I’ve never lived in the shadows,” Entreri replied. “You could have found me any day, any time.”

“Why would I bother?”

Entreri considered the ridiculous question, then gave a little shrug, deciding not to justify the boastful retort with an answer.

“You know why I’m here,” the man said at length, his tone sharper than before—a further indication that his nerves were on edge.

“Funny, I thought I was the one who’d found you,” Entreri replied. He hid well his concern that this thug might be here, might be on Entreri’s street, with more of a purpose than he’d presumed.

“You had no choice but to find me,” the invader asserted firmly.

There it was again, that implication of a deeper purpose. It occurred to Entreri then that this man, for he was indeed a man and no street waif, should already be above staking out a claim to such a squalid area as this. Even if he were new to the trade, this course would not be the course for an adult ruffian. He should be allied with one of the many thieves’ guilds in this city of thieves. Why, then, had he come? And why alone?

Had he been kicked out of a guild, perhaps?

For a brief moment, Entreri feared he might be in over his head. His opponent was an adult, and possibly a veteran rogue. Entreri shook the notion away, saw that his reasoning was not sound. Young upstarts did not get “kicked out” of Calimport’s thieves’ guilds; they merely disappeared—and no one bothered to question their abrupt absence. But this opponent was not, obviously, some child who had been forced out on his own.

“Who are you?” Entreri asked bluntly. He wished he could take the question back as soon as the words had left his mouth, fearing

he had just tipped the thug off to his own ignorance. Entreri was ultimately alone in his place. He had no network surrounding him, no spies of any merit, and little understanding of the true power structures of Calimport.

The thug smiled and spent a long moment studying his opponent. Entreri was small, and probably as quick and sure in a fight as the guild's reports had indicated. He stood easily, his hands still in the pockets of his ragged breeches, his bare, brown-tanned arms small, but sculpted with finely honed muscles. The thug knew Entreri had no allies, had been told that before he had been sent out here. Yet this boy—and in the older thief's eyes, Entreri was indeed a boy—stood easily and seemed composed far beyond his years. One other thing bothered the man.

"You have no weapon?" he asked suspiciously.

Again, Entreri offered only a little shrug in reply.

"Very well, then," the thug said, his tone firm, as if he had just made a decision. To accentuate that very point, he took up the board, still dripping with the blood of the old man. Decisively he brought it up to his shoulder, brought it up, Entreri realized, to a more accessible position. The thug was barely twenty feet away when he began his approach.

So much more was going on here, Entreri knew, and he wanted answers.

Ten feet away.

Entreri held his steady and calm pose, but his muscles tightened in preparation.

The man was barely five feet from him. Entreri's right hand whipped out of his pocket, hurling a spray of fine sand.

Up came the club, and the man turned his head away. He was laughing when he looked back. "Trying to blind me with a handful of sand?" he asked incredulously, sarcastically. "How clever of a desert fighter to think of using sand!"

Of course it was the proverbial "oldest trick" in sneaky Calimshan's thick book of underhanded street fighting techniques. And the next oldest trick followed when Entreri thrust his hand back into his pocket, and whipped a second handful of sand.

The thug was laughing even as he closed his eyes, defeating the attack. He blinked quickly, just for an instant, a split second. But that instant was long enough for ambidextrous Entreri to withdraw his left hand from his pocket and fling the edged stone. He had just one window of opportunity, an instant of time, a square inch of target. He had to be perfect—but that was the way it had been for Entreri since he was a child, since he went out into the desert, a land that did not forgive the smallest of mistakes.

The sharp stone whistled past the upraised club and hit the thug in the throat, just to one side of center. It nicked into his windpipe and deflected to the left, cutting the wall of an artery before rebounding free into the air.

"Wh—?" the thug began, and he stopped, apparently surprised by the curious whistle that had suddenly come into his voice. A shower of blood erupted from his neck, spraying up across his cheek. He slapped his free hand to it, fingers grasping, trying to stem the flow. He kept his cool enough to hold his makeshift club at the ready the whole time, keeping Entreri at bay, though the younger man had put his hands back in his pockets and made no move.

He was good, Entreri decided, honestly applauding the man's calm and continued defense. He was good, but Entreri was perfect. You had to be perfect.

The outward flow of blood was nearly stemmed, but the artery was severed and the windpipe open beside it.

The thug growled and advanced. Entreri didn't blink.

The thug stopped suddenly, dark eyes wide. He tried to speak out, but only sputtered forth a bright gout of blood. He tried to draw breath, but gurgled again pitifully, his lungs fast-filling with blood, and sank to his knees.

It took him a long time to die. Calimport was an unforgiving place. You had to be perfect.

"Well done," came a voice from the left.

Entreri turned to see two men casually stroll out of a narrow alley. He knew at once that they were thieves, probably guildsmen, for confident Entreri believed only the most practiced rogues could get so close to him without him knowing it.

Entreri looked back to the corpse at his feet, and a hundred questions danced about his thoughts. He knew then with cold certainty that this had been no random meeting. The thug he had killed had been sent to him.

Entreri chuckled, more a derisive snort than a laugh, and kicked a bit of dirt into the dead man's face.

Less than perfect got you killed. Perfect, as Entreri soon found out, got you invited into the local thieves' guild.

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Entreri could hardly fathom the notion that all the food he wanted was available to him with a snap of his fingers. He had been offered a soft bed, too, but feared that such luxury would weaken him. He slept on his floor at night.

Still, the offer was the important thing. Entreri cared little for material wealth or pleasures, but he cared greatly that those pleasures were being offered to him.

That was the benefit of being in the Basadoni Cabal, one of the most powerful thieves' guilds in all the city. In fact there were many benefits. To an independent young man such as Artemis Entreri, there were many drawbacks, as well.

Lieutenant Theebles Royuset, the man whom Pasha Basadoni had appointed as Entreri's personal mentor, was one of these. He was the epitome of men that young Artemis Entreri loathed, gluttonous and lazy, with heavy eyelids that perpetually drooped. His smelly brown hair was naturally frizzy, but too greased and dirty to come away from his scalp, and he always wore the remnants of his last four meals on the front of his shirt. Physically, there was nothing quick about Theebles, except the one movement that brought the latest handful of food into his slopping jowls, but intellectually, the man was sharp and dangerous.

And sadistic. Despite the obvious physical limitations, Theebles was in the second rank of command in the guild, along with a half-dozen other lieutenants, behind only Pasha Basadoni himself.

Entreri hated him. Theebles had been a merchant, and like so many of Calimport's purveyors, had gotten himself into severe

trouble with the city guard. So Theebles had used his wealth to buy himself an appointment to the guild, that he might go underground and escape Calimport's dreaded prisons. That wealth must have been considerable, Entreri knew, for Pasha Basadoni to even accept this dangerous slug into the guild, let alone appoint him a lieutenant.

Entreri was savvy enough to understand, then, that Basadoni's choice of sadistic Theebles as his personal mentor would be a true test of his loyalty to his new family.

A brutal test, Entreri realized as he leaned against the squared stone wall of a square chamber in the guild hall's basement. He crossed his arms defensively over his chest, fingers of his thick gloves tapping silently, impatiently. He found that he missed his street in the city outside, missed the days when he had answered to no one but himself and his survival instincts. Those days had ended with the well-aimed throw of an edged stone.

"Well?" Theebles, who had come for one of his many unannounced inspections, prompted again. He picked something rather large out of his wide and flat nose. Like everything else that fell into his plump and almost baby-like hands, it quickly went into his mouth.

Entreri didn't blink. He looked from Theebles to the ten-gallon glass case across the dimly lit room; the chamber, though fully twenty feet underground, was dry and dusty.

Swaying with every step, the fat lieutenant paced to the case. Entreri obediently followed, but only after a quick nod to the rogue standing guard at the door, the same rogue who had met Entreri on the street after he had killed the thug. That man, Dancer by name, was another of Theebles's servants, and one of the many friends young Entreri had made in his time in the guild. Dancer returned the nod and slipped out into the hall.

He trusts me, Entreri thought. He considered Dancer the fool for it.

Entreri caught up to Theebles right in front of the case. The fat man stared intently at the small orange snakes intertwined within.

"Beautiful," Theebles said. "So sleek and delicate." He turned his heavy-lidded gaze Entreri's way.

Entreri could not deny the words. The snakes were Thesali vipers, the dreaded “Two-Step.” If one bit you, you yelled, took two steps, and fell down dead. Efficient. Beautiful.

Milking the venom from the deadly vipers, even with the thick gloves he wore, was not an enviable task. But then, wretched Theebles Royuset made it a point to never give Entreri an enviable task.

Theebles stared at the tantalizing snakes for a long while, then glanced back to the right. He stymied his surprise, realizing that silent Entreri had moved around him, toward the far end of the room. He turned to the young rogue and gave a wry snicker, that superior chuckle that reminded Entreri pointedly of his position as an underling.

It was then that Theebles noticed the quarter table, partially concealed by a screen. Surprise showed on his pudgy, blotchy features for a moment before he caught himself and calmed. “Your doing?” he asked, approaching the screen and indicating the small and round glass-topped table, flanked on either side by a waist-high lever.

Entreri turned slowly to glance over one shoulder as Theebles passed him by, but didn’t bother to answer. Entreri was the milker of the snakes. Of course the table was “his doing.” Who else, except for his taunting mentor, would even bother coming into this room?

“You have made many allies among the lower members of the guild,” Theebles remarked, as close to a word of praise as he had ever given to Entreri. In fact, Theebles was truly impressed; it was quite a feat for one so new to the guild to have the infamous quarter table moved to a quiet and convenient location. But Theebles, when he took the moment to consider it, was not so surprised. This young Artemis Entreri was an imposing character, a charismatic young rogue who had ruffians much older than him showing a great degree of respect.

Yes, Theebles knew that Artemis Entreri was not an average little pickpocket. He could be a great thief, among the very best. That could be a positive thing for the Basadoni Cabal. Or it could be a dangerous thing.

Without turning back, Entreri walked across the room and sat down at one of the two chairs placed on opposite sides of the quarter table.

It was not a wholly unexpected challenge, of course. Theebles had played out similar scenarios several times with the youths under his severe tutelage. Furthermore, young Entreri certainly knew now that it had been Theebles who had sent the rogue out to the shantytown to challenge him. Dancer had told Entreri as much, Theebles guessed; he made a mental note to have a little talk with Dancer when he was done with Entreri. Laughing slightly, the fat man sauntered across the room to stand beside the seated young rogue. He saw that the four glasses set in the evenly spaced depressions about the table's perimeter were half-filled with clear water. In the middle of the table sat an empty milking vial.

"You understand that I am a close personal friend of Pasha Basadoni," Theebles said.

"I understand that if you sit down in that chair, you accept the challenge willingly," Entreri replied. He reached in and removed the milking vial. By the strict rules of the challenge, the table had to be clear of everything except the four glasses.

Theebles shook with laughter, and Entreri had expected no less. Entreri knew that he had no right to make such a challenge. Still, Entreri breathed a little easier when Theebles clapped him on the shoulders and walked about the table. The fat lieutenant stopped and peered intently into each of the glasses, as if he had noticed something.

It was a bluff, Entreri pointedly told himself. The venom of a Thesali viper was perfectly clear, like the water.

"You used enough?" Theebles asked with complete calm.

Entreri didn't respond, didn't blink. He knew, as did the fat lieutenant, that a single drop was all that was needed.

"And you only poisoned one glass?" Theebles asked, another rhetorical question, for the rules of this challenge were explicit.

Theebles sat in the appointed chair, apparently accepting the challenge. Entreri's façade nearly cracked, and he had to stifle a sigh of relief. The lieutenant could have refused, could have had Entreri

dragged out and disembowelled for even thinking that he was worthy of making such a challenge against a ranking guild member. Entreri had suspected that cruel Theebles would not take so direct a route, of course. Theebles hated him as much as he hated Theebles, and he had done everything in his power over the last few tendays to feed that hatred.

"Only one?" Theebles asked again.

"Would it matter?" Entreri replied, thinking himself clever. "One, two, or three poisoned drinks, the risks remain equal between us."

The fat lieutenant's expression grew sour. "It is a quarter table," he said condescendingly. "A quarter. One in four. That is the rule. When the top is spun, each of us has a one-in-four chance of sipping the poisoned drink. And by the rules, no more than one glass can be poisoned, no more than one can die."

"Only one is poisoned," Entreri confirmed.

"The poison is that of the Thesali viper, and only the poison of a Thesali viper?"

Entreri nodded. To a wary challenger like the young rogue, the question screamed the fact that Theebles didn't fear such venom. Of course he didn't.

Theebles returned the nod and took on a serious expression to match his opponent's. "You are certain of your course?" he asked, his voice full of gravity.

Entreri did not miss the experienced killer's sly undertones. Theebles was pretending to offer him the opportunity to change his mind, but it was only a ruse. And Entreri would play along. He glanced about nervously, summoned a bead of sweat to his forehead. "Perhaps …" he began tentatively, giving the appearance of hedging.

"Yes?" Theebles prompted after a long pause.

Entreri started to rise, as though he had indeed changed his mind about making such a challenge; Theebles stopped him with a sharp word. The expression of surprise upon Entreri's young and too-delicate face appeared sincere.

"Challenge accepted," the lieutenant growled. "You cannot change your mind."

Entreri fell back into his seat, grabbed the edge of the tabletop, and yanked hard. Like a gambling wheel, the top rotated, spinning smoothly and quietly on its central hub. Entreri grabbed the long lever flanking him, one of the table's brakes, and Theebles, smiling smugly, did likewise.

It quickly became a game of nerves. Entreri and Theebles locked gazes, and for the first time, Theebles saw the depth of his young adversary. At that moment Theebles began to appreciate the pure cunning of merciless Artemis Entreri. Still, he was unafraid and remained composed enough to note the subtle shift of Entreri's eye, the hint that the young man was quietly watching the spinning glasses more intently than he was letting on.

Entreri caught a minute flicker, a subtle flash of reflected light from the table, then a second. Long before Theebles had come to visit, he had chipped the rim of one of the glasses ever so slightly. Entreri had then painstakingly aligned the table and the seat he'd chosen. With every rotation, the tiny chip in the glass would flicker a reflection of the torch burning in the nearest wall sconce—but to his eyes only.

Entreri silently counted the elapsed time between flickers, measuring the table's speed.

"Why would you take such a risk?" wary Theebles asked, verbally prodding the young man's concentration. "Have you come to hate me so much in a few short tendays?"

"Long months," Entreri corrected. "But it has been longer than that. My fight in the street was no coincidence. It was a set-up, a test, between myself and the man I had to kill. And you are the one who arranged it."

The way that Entreri described his adversary, "the man I had to kill," tipped Theebles off to the young rogue's motivation. The stranger in the dusty street had likely been Artemis Entreri's first kill. The lieutenant smiled to himself. Some weaklings found murder a difficult thing to accept; either the first kill, or the inevitable path it had set the young man on, was not to Entreri's liking.

"I had to know if you were worthy," Theebles said, admitting his complicity. But Entreri was no longer listening. The young rogue

had gone back to his subtle study of the spinning glasses.

Theebles eased his brake, slowing the rotation considerably. The hub was well greased—some even claimed there was a bit of magic about it—so the top did not need much momentum to keep spinning at a nearly constant rate.

Entreri showed no sign of distress at the unexpected speed change. He kept completely composed and began silently counting once more. The marked glass flickered exactly an eighth of the circumference from Theebles's chair. Entreri adjusted his cadence to make each complete rotation take a count of eight.

He saw the flicker; he counted and as he hit nine, abruptly pulled the brake.

The tabletop came to a sudden stop, liquid sloshing back and forth inside the glasses, droplets of it splattering to the table and the floor.

Theebles eyed the glass in front of him. He thought to remark that the young rogue didn't understand the proper protocol of the quarter table challenge, for the brakes were supposed to be applied slowly, alternately between the opponents, and the challenged party would make the final stop. The fat lieutenant decided not to make an issue of it. He knew that he had been taken, but didn't really care. He'd been expecting this challenge for almost a tenday and had enough antivenin in his blood to defeat the poison of a hundred Thesali vipers. He lifted his glass. Entreri did likewise, and together they drank deeply.

Five seconds passed. Ten.

"Well," Theebles began. "It would seem that neither of us found the unfortunate quarter this day." He pulled his huge form from the chair. "Of course, your insolence will be reported in full to Pasha Basadoni."

Entreri showed no expression, didn't blink. Theebles suspected that the young rogue was hiding his surprise, or that he was fuming or trying to figure out how he might escape this unexpected disaster. As the seconds passed, the young man's continued calm began to bother the fat lieutenant.

“You have had your one challenge,” Theebles snapped suddenly, loudly. “I am alive, thus you have lost. Expect to pay dearly for your impertinence!”

Entreri didn’t blink.

Good enough for the young upstart, the fat lieutenant decided with a snap of his fingers. As he departed, he thought of many ways that he might properly punish Entreri.

How delicious that torture would be, for Basadoni could not stop Theebles this time. The guildmaster, who by Theebles’s estimation had become much too soft in his old age, had intervened many times on behalf of Entreri, calming Theebles whenever he learned that the fat lieutenant was planning a brutal punishment for the young upstart. Not this time, though. This time, Basadoni could not intervene. This time, Entreri had certainly earned the punishment.

The first place Theebles went when he returned to his lavish private quarters was the well-stocked cupboard. The antivenin to Thesali viper poison was known to cause great hunger after the poison was introduced, and Theebles had never been one to need much prompting toward food. He pulled out a two-layered cake, a gigantic, sugar-speckled arrangement, decorated with the sweetest of fruits.

He took up a knife to cut a slice, then shrugged and decided to eat the whole thing. With both hands, he lifted the cake to his mouth.

“Oh, clever lad!” Theebles congratulated, returning the cake to the table. “Sly upon sly, a feint within a feint! Of course you knew the effects of Thesali antivenin. Of course you knew that I would run back here to my personal cupboard! And you have had the time, haven’t you, Artemis Entreri? Clever lad!”

Theebles looked to the window and thought to throw the cake out into the street. Let the homeless waifs find its crumbs and eat them, and all fall down dead! But the cake, the beautiful cake. He couldn’t bear to be done with it, and he was so, so famished.

Instead, he moved across the room to his private desk. He carefully unlocked the trapped drawers, checked the wax seal to be certain that no one had been here before him, to be certain that Entreri could not have tampered with this supply. Satisfied that all

was as it should be, Theebles opened a secret compartment at the bottom of the drawer and removed a very valuable vial. It contained an amber-colored liquid, a magic potion that would neutralize any poison a man might imbibe. Theebles looked back to the cake. Would Entreri be as clever as he believed? Would the young rogue really understand the concept of sly upon sly?

Theebles sighed and decided Entreri just might be that clever. The vial of universal antidote was very expensive, but the cake looked so very delicious!

"I will make Artemis Entreri pay for another vial," the now-famished lieutenant decided as he swallowed the antidote. Then he romped across the room and took a tiny bit off the edge of the cake, testing its flavor. It was indeed poisoned. Experienced Theebles knew that at once from the barely perceptible sour edge among the sweetness.

The antidote would defeat it, the lieutenant knew, and he would not let the young upstart cheat him out of so fine a meal. He rubbed his plump hands together and took up the cake, gorging himself, swallowing huge chunks at a time, wiping the silver serving platter clean.

Theebles died that night, horribly, waking from a sound sleep into sheer agony. It was as if his insides were on fire. He tried to call out, but his voice was drowned by his own blood.

His attendant found him early the next morning, his mouth full of gore, his pillowcase spotted with brownish red spots, and his abdomen covered with angry blue welts. Many in the guild had heard Dancer speak of the previous day's challenge, and so the connection to young Artemis Entreri was not a hard one to make.

The young assassin was caught on the streets of Calimport a tenday later, after giving Pasha Basadoni's powerful spy network a fine run. He was more resigned than afraid as two burly, older killers led him roughly back to the guild hall.

Entreri believed Basadoni would punish him, perhaps even kill him, for his actions; it was worth it just to know that Theebles Royuset had died horribly.

He had never been in the uppermost chambers of the guild hall before, never imagined what riches lay within. Beautiful women, covered in glittering jewels, roamed through every room. Great cushiony couches and pillows were heaped everywhere, and behind every third archway was a steaming tub of scented water.

This entire floor of the hall was devoted to purely hedonistic pursuits, a place dedicated to every imaginable pleasure. Yet to Entreri, it appeared more dangerous than enticing. His goal was perfection, not pleasure, and this was a place where a man would grow soft.

He was somewhat surprised, then, when he at last came to stand before Pasha Basadoni, the first time Entreri had actually met the man. Basadoni's small office was the only room on this floor of the guild hall not fitted for comfort. Its furnishings were few and simple —a single wooden desk and three unremarkable chairs.

The pasha fit the office. He was a smallish man, old but stately. His gaze, like his posture, was perfectly straight. His gray hair was neatly groomed, his clothes unpretentious.

After only a couple moments of scrutiny, Entreri understood that this was a man to be respected, even feared. Looking at the pasha, Entreri considered again how out of place a slug like Theebles Royuset had been. He guessed at once that Basadoni must have hated Theebles profoundly. That notion alone gave him hope.

"So you admit you cheated at the quarter challenge?" Basadoni asked after a long and deliberate pause, after studying young Entreri at least as intently as Entreri was studying him.

"Isn't that part of the challenge?" Entreri was quick to reply.

Basadoni chuckled and nodded.

"Theebles expected I would cheat," Entreri went on. "A vial of universal antidote was found emptied within his room."

"And you tampered with it?"

"I did not," Entreri answered honestly.

Basadoni's quizzical expression prompted the young rogue to continue.

"The vial worked as expected, and the cake was indeed conventionally poisoned," Entreri admitted.

“But …” Basadoni said.

“But no antidote in Calimshan can defeat the effects of crushed glass.”

Basadoni shook his head. “Sly upon sly within sly,” he said. “A feint within a feint within a feint.” He looked curiously at the clever young lad. “Theebles was capable of thinking to the third level of deception,” he reasoned.

“But he did not believe that I was,” Entreri quickly countered. “He underestimated his opponent.”

“And so he deserved to die,” Basadoni decided after a short pause.

“The challenge was willingly accepted,” Entreri quickly noted, to remind the old pasha that any punishment would surely, by the rules of the guild, be unjustified.

Basadoni leaned back in his chair, tapping the tips of his fingers together. He stared at Entreri long and hard. The young assassin’s reasoning was sound, but he almost ordered Entreri killed anyway, seeing clearly the cruelty, the absolute lack of compassion, within this one’s black heart. He understood that he could never truly trust Artemis Entreri, but he realized, too, that young Entreri would not likely strike against him, an old man and a potentially valuable mentor, unless he forced the issue. And Basadoni knew, too, how valuable an asset a clever and cold rogue like Artemis Entreri might be—especially with five other ambitious lieutenants scrambling to position themselves in the hope that he would soon die.

Perhaps I will outlive those five, after all, the pasha thought with a slight smile. To Entreri he merely said, “I will exact no punishment.”

Entreri showed no emotion.

“Truly you are a cold-hearted wretch,” Basadoni went on with a helpless snicker, his voice honestly sympathetic. “Leave me, Lieutenant Entreri.” He waved his age-spotted hand as if the whole affair left a sour taste in his mouth.

Entreri turned to go, but stopped and glanced back, realizing only then the significance of how Basadoni had addressed him.

The two burly escorts at the newest lieutenant’s side caught it, too. One of them bristled anxiously, glaring at the young man. Lieutenant Artemis Entreri? the man’s dour expression seemed to

say in disbelief. The boy, half his size, had only been in the guild for a few months. He was only fourteen years old!

"Perhaps my first duty will be to see to your continued training," Entreri said, staring coldly into the muscular man's face. "You must learn to mask your feelings better."

The man's moment of anger was replaced by a feeling of sheer dread as he, too, stared into those callous and calculating dark eyes, eyes too filled with evil for one of Artemis Entreri's tender age.

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Later that afternoon, Artemis Entreri walked out of the Basadoni guild hall on a short journey that was long overdue. He went back to his street, the territory he had carved out amidst Calimport's squalor.

A dusty orange sunset marked the end of another hot day as Entreri turned a corner and entered that territory—the same corner the thug had turned just before Entreri had killed him.

Entreri shook his head, feeling more than a little overwhelmed by it all. He had survived these streets, the challenge Theebles Royuset had thrown his way, and the counter-challenge he had offered in response. He had survived, and he had thrived, and was now a full lieutenant in the Basadoni Cabal.

Slowly, Entreri walked the length of the muddy lane, his gaze stalking from left to right and back again, just as he had done when he was the master here. When these had been his streets, life had been simple. Now his course was set out before him, among his own treacherous kind. Ever after would he need to walk with his back close to a wall—a solid wall that he had already checked for deadly traps and secret portals.

It had all happened so fast, in the course of just a few months. Street waif to lieutenant in the Basadoni Cabal, one of the most powerful thieves' guilds in Calimport.

Yet as he looked back over the road that had brought him from Memnon to Calimport, from this muddy alley to the polished marble halls of the thieves' guild, Artemis Entreri began to wonder if, perhaps, the change was somewhat less miraculous. Nothing really

happened so quickly; he'd been led to this seemingly remarkable state by years spent honing his street skills, years spent challenging and conquering brutal men like Theebles, or the old lecher in the caravan, or his father….

A noise from the side drew Entreri's attention to a wide alley where a group of boys came rambling past. Half the grimy mob tossed a small stone back and forth while the other half tried to get it away.

It came as a shock to Entreri when he realized that they were his own age, perhaps even a bit older. And the shock carried with it more than a little pain.

The boys soon disappeared behind the next shack, laughing and shouting, a cloud of dust in their wake. Entreri summarily dismissed them, thinking again of what he had accomplished and what heights of glory and power might still lay before him. After all, he had purchased the right to dream such dark dreams at the cost of his youth and innocence, coins whose value he did not recognize until they were spent.

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GUENHWYVAR

Ah, Guen, where to begin? I've been a pet lover for all of my life, and spent many a day sitting alone with a dog or a cat talking through my anxieties and hopes. I know how good a friend such a companion can be, and so when I considered Drizzt's predicament, being a drow elf on a surface world that didn't much care for his ilk, giving him a magical animal companion was an easy choice.

Let me state here that I am not a "happy" short story writer. I don't particularly like the format, the restrictions, the forced imposition of hook or story over character development. Every now and then, though, I like having a short story to explore something off to the side of the novels, like the history of the mysterious Guen. This story gave me the chance to have some fun with quite a few concepts. Myth Drannor has always intrigued me as the purest place in Ed Greenwood's Realms vision. And at the time I wrote this, I was intrigued by the "bladesinger" concept that had come forth in the AD&D 2nd Edition game. At last, a true battle mage!

And finally, with this story, I could put to rest once and for all the inadvertent confusion of Guen's gender—or so I hoped. Let me explain something: Guenhwyvar was always a "she." Always. I first encountered the name, a variation of Arthur's queen, in Mary Stewart's outrageously fantastic Arthurian series. "Guenhwyvar" is Celtic or Gaelic for Jennifer or Gwenivere, depending on whom you ask. Stewart claimed it to mean "shadow," which perfectly fit the panther companion of Drizzt.

In any case, when I wrote *The Crystal Shard*, I was told not to assign a gender to the panther. Magical items in the AD&D game were not given a gender, was the simple explanation. I argued, but to no avail. Then, to my horror, when the book came out, I discovered that someone, likely a copy-editor, had smoothed out some of my scenes by replacing some of the awkward variations of "it" with a male pronoun. I have subsequently answered hundreds of letters explaining the confusion here, because I went right back to the female pronouns. Guen is a she!

I wrote this story as a precursor to an idea I had for a Drizzt-related Forgotten Realms trilogy. The catch was to use my cleric Cadderly to magically explore the magical panther's long memory, and through Guen, with Cadderly narrating, relate the story of her first companion, Josidiah Starym. I held out hope for doing that story for several years, until I found out that someone else had taken my character, Josidiah, and created an entire history around him, including his death. Ah, the tribulations of working in a shared world!

That said, this story more than any other is a celebration of the Dungeons and Dragons game. From the bladesinger to Myth Drannor to the many D&D "toys" involved, looking back at "Guenhwyvar," I can see that I was particularly excited about the game and game world at this time.





Josidiah Starym skipped wistfully down the streets of Cormanthor, the usually stern and somber elf a bit giddy this day, both for the beautiful weather and the recent developments in his most precious and enchanted city. Josidiah was a bladesinger, a joining of sword and magic, protector of the elvish ways and the elvish folk. And in Cormanthor, in this year 253, many elves were in need of protecting. Goblinkin were abundant, and even worse, the emotional turmoil within the city, the strife among the noble families—the Starym included—threatened to tear apart all that Coronal Eltargrim had put together, all that the elves had built in Cormanthor, greatest city in all the world.

Those were not troubles for this day, though, not in the spring sunshine, with a light north breeze blowing. Even Josidiah's kin were in good spirits this day; Taleisin, his uncle, had promised the bladesinger that he would venture to Eltargrim's court to see if some of their disputes might perhaps be worked out.

Josidiah prayed that the elven court would come back together, for he, perhaps above all others in the city, had the most to lose. He was a bladesinger, the epitome of what it meant to be an elf, and yet, in this curious age, those definitions seemed not so clear. This was an age of change, of great magics, of monumental decisions. This was an age when the humans, the gnomes, the halflings, even the bearded dwarves ventured down the winding ways of Cormanthor, past the needle-pointed spires of the free-flowing elven structures. For all of Josidiah's previous one hundred and fifty years, the precepts of elvenkind seemed fairly defined and rigid; but now, because of their Coronal, wise and gentle Eltargrim, there was much dispute about what it meant to be an elf, and, more importantly, what relationships elves should foster with the other goodly races.

“Merry morn, Josidiah,” came the call of a female elf, the young and beautiful maiden niece of Eltargrim himself. She stood on a balcony overlooking a high garden whose buds were not yet in bloom, with the avenue beyond that.

Josidiah stopped in mid stride, leaped high into the air in a complete spin, and landed perfectly on bended knee, his long golden hair whipping across his face and then flying out wide again so that his eyes, the brightest of blue, flashed. “And the merriest of morns to you, good Felicity,” the bladesinger responded. “Would that I held at my sides flowers befitting your beauty instead of these blades made for war.”

“Blades as beautiful as any flower ever I have seen,” Felicity replied teasingly, “especially when wielded by Josidiah Starym at dawn’s break, on the flat rock atop Berenguil’s Peak.”

The bladesinger felt the hot blood rushing to his face. He had suspected that someone had been spying on him at his morning rituals—a dance with his magnificent swords, performed nude—and now he had his confirmation. “Perhaps Felicity should join me on the morrow’s dawn,” he replied, catching his breath and his dignity, “that I might properly reward her for her spying.”

The young female laughed heartily and spun back into her house, and Josidiah shook his head and skipped along. He entertained thoughts of how he might properly “reward” the mischievous female, though he feared that, given Felicity’s beauty and station, any such attempts might lead to something much more, something Josidiah could not become involved in—not now, not after Eltargrim’s proclamation and the drastic changes.

The bladesinger shook away all such notions; it was too fine a day for any dark musing, and other thoughts of Felicity were too distracting for the meeting at hand. Josidiah went out of Cormanthor’s west gate, the guards posted there offering no more than a respectful bow as he passed, and into the open air. Truly Josidiah loved this city, but he loved the land outside of it even more. Out here he was truly free of all the worries and all the petty squabbles, and out here there was ever a sense of danger—might a

goblin be watching him even now, its crude spear ready to take him down?—that kept the formidable elf on his highest guard.

Out here, too, was a friend, a human friend, a ranger-turned-wizard by the name of Anders Beltgarden, whom Josidiah had known for the better part of four decades. Anders did not venture into Cormanthor, even given Eltargrim's proclamation to open the gates to nonelves. He lived far from the normal, oft-traveled paths, in a squat tower of excellent construction, guarded by magical wards and deceptions of his own making. Even the forest about his home was full of misdirections, spells of illusion and confusion. So secretive was Beltgarden Home that few elves of nearby Cormanthor even knew of it, and even fewer had ever seen it. And of those, none save Josidiah could find his way back to it without Anders's help.

And Josidiah held no illusions about it—if Anders wanted to hide the paths to the tower even from him, the cagey old wizard would have little trouble doing so.

This wonderful day, however, it seemed to Josidiah that the winding paths to Beltgarden Home were easier to follow than usual, and when he arrived at the structure, he found the door unlocked.

"Anders," he called, peering into the darkened hallway beyond the portal, which always smelled as if a dozen candles had just been extinguished within it. "Old fool, are you about?"

A feral growl put the bladesinger on his guard; his swords were in his hands in a movement too swift for an observer to follow.

"Anders?" he called again, quietly, as he picked his way along the corridor, his feet moving in perfect balance, soft boots gently touching the stone, quiet as a hunting cat.

The growl came again, and that is exactly when Josidiah knew what he was up against: a hunting cat. A big one, the bladesinger recognized, for the deep growl resonated along the stone of the hallway.

He passed by the first doors, opposite each other in the hall, and then passed the second on his left.

The third—he knew—the sound came from within the third. That knowledge gave the bladesinger some hope that this situation was

under control, for that particular door led to Anders's alchemy shop, a place well guarded by the old wizard.

Josidiah cursed himself for not being better prepared magically. He had studied few spells that day, thinking it too fine and not wanting to waste a moment of it with his face buried in spellbooks.

If only he had some spell that might get him into the room more quickly, through a magical gate, or even a spell that would send his probing vision through the stone wall, into the room before him.

He had his swords, at least, and with them, Josidiah Starym was far from helpless. He put his back against the wall near to the door and took a deep steadying breath. Then, without delay—old Anders might be in serious trouble—the bladesinger spun about and crashed into the room.

He felt the arcs of electricity surging into him as he crossed the warded portal, and then he was flying, hurled through the air, to land crashing at the base of a huge oaken table. Anders Beltgarden stood calmly at the side of the table, working with something atop it, hardly bothering to look down at the stunned bladesinger.

"You might have knocked," the old mage said dryly.

Josidiah pulled himself up unceremoniously from the floor, his muscles not quite working correctly just yet. Convinced that there was no danger near, Josidiah let his gaze linger on the human, as he often did. The bladesinger hadn't seen many humans in his life—humans were a recent addition on the north side of the Sea of Fallen Stars, and were not present in great numbers in or about Cormanthor.

This one was the most curious human of all, with his leathery, wrinkled face and his wild gray beard. One of Anders's eyes had been ruined in a fight, and it appeared quite dead now, a gray film over the lustrous green it had once held. Yes, Josidiah could stare at old Anders for hours on end, seeing the tales of a lifetime in his scars and wrinkles. Most of the elves, Josidiah's own kinfolk included, would have thought the old man an ugly thing; elves did not wrinkle and weather so, but aged beautifully, appearing at the end of several centuries as they had when they had seen but twenty or fifty winters.

Josidiah did not think Anders an ugly sight, not at all. Even those few crooked teeth remaining in the man's mouth complemented this creature he had become, this aged and wise creature, this sculptured monument to years under the sun and in the face of storms, to seasons battling goblinkin and giantkind. Truly it seemed ridiculous to Josidiah that he was twice this man's age; he wished he might carry a few wrinkles as testament to his experiences.

"You had to know it would be warded," Anders laughed. "Of course you did! Ha ha, just putting on a show, then. Giving an old man one good laugh before he dies!"

"You will outlive me, I fear, old man," said the bladesinger.

"Indeed, that is a distinct possibility if you keep crossing my doors unannounced."

"I feared for you," Josidiah explained, looking around the huge room—too huge, it seemed, to fit inside the tower, even if it had consumed an entire level. The bladesinger suspected some extradimensional magic to be at work here, but he had never been able to detect it, and the frustrating Anders certainly wasn't letting on.

As large as it was, Anders's alchemy shop was still a cluttered place, with boxes piled high and tables and cabinets strewn about in a hodgepodge.

"I heard a growl," the elf continued. "A hunting cat."

Without looking up from some vials he was handling, Anders nodded his head in the direction of a large, blanket-covered container. "See that you do not get too close," the old mage said with a wicked cackle. "Old Whiskers will grab you by the arm and tug you in, don't you doubt!

"And then you'll need more than your shiny swords," Anders cackled on.

Josidiah wasn't even listening, pacing quietly toward the blanket, moving silently so as not to disturb the cat within. He grabbed the edge of the blanket and, moving safely back, tugged it away. And then the bladesinger's jaw surely drooped.

It was a cat, as he had suspected, a great black panther, twice—no thrice—the size of the largest cat Josidiah had ever seen or heard of.

And the cat was female, and females were usually much smaller than males. She paced the cage slowly, methodically, as if searching for some weakness, some escape, her rippling muscles guiding her along with unmatched grace.

"How did you come by such a magnificent beast?" the bladesinger asked. His voice apparently startled the panther, stopping her in her tracks. She stared at Josidiah with an intensity that stole any further words right from the blade singer's mouth.

"Oh, I have my ways, elf," the old mage said. "I've been looking for just the right cat for a long, long time, searching all the known world—and bits of it that are not yet known to any but me!"

"But why?" Josidiah asked, his voice no more than a whisper. His question was aimed as much at the magnificent panther as at the old mage, and truly, the bladesinger could think of no reason to justify putting such a creature into a cage.

"You remember my tale of the box canyon," Anders replied, "of how my mentor and I flew owl-back out of the clutches of a thousand goblins?"

Josidiah nodded and smiled, remembering well that amusing story. A moment later, though, when the implications of Anders's words hit him fully, the elf turned back to the mage, a scowl clouding his fair face. "The figurine," Josidiah muttered, for the owl had been but a statuette, enchanted to bring forth a great bird in times of its master's need. There were many such objects in the world, many in Cormanthor, and Josidiah was not unacquainted with the methods of constructing them (though his own magics were not strong enough along the lines of enchanting). He looked back to the great panther, saw a distinct sadness there, then turned back sharply to Anders.

"The cat must be killed at the moment of preparation," the bladesinger protested. "Thus her life energies will be drawn into the statuette you will have created."

"Working on that even now," Anders said lightly. "I have hired a most excellent dwarf craftsman to fashion a panther statuette. The finest craftsman … er, craftsdwarf, in all the area. Fear not, the statuette will do the cat justice."

“Justice?” the bladesinger echoed skeptically, looking once more into the intense, intelligent yellow-green eyes of the huge panther. “You will kill the cat?”

“I offer the cat immortality,” Anders said indignantly.

“You offer death to her will, and slavery to her body,” snapped Josidiah, more angry than he had ever been with old Anders. The bladesinger had seen figurines and thought them marvelous artifacts, despite the sacrifice of the animal in question. Even Josidiah killed deer and wild pig for his table, after all. So why should a wizard not create some useful item from an animal?

But this time it was different, Josidiah sensed in his heart. This animal, this great and free cat, must not be so enslaved.

“You will make the panther …” Josidiah began.

“Whiskers,” explained Anders.

“The panther …” the bladesinger reiterated forcefully, unable to come to terms with such a foolish name being tagged on this animal. “You will make the panther a tool, an animation that will function to the will of her master.”

“What would one expect?” the old mage argued. “What else would one want?”

Josidiah shrugged and sighed helplessly. “Independence,” he muttered.

“Then what would be the point of my troubles?”

Josidiah’s expression clearly showed his thinking. An independent magical companion might not be of much use to an adventurer in a dangerous predicament, but it would surely be preferable from the sacrificed animal’s point of view.

“You chose wrong, bladesinger,” Anders teased. “You should have studied as a ranger. Surely your sympathies lie in that direction!”

“A ranger,” the bladesinger asked, “as Anders Beltgarden once was?”

The old mage blew a long and helpless sigh.

“Have you so given up the precepts of your former trade in exchange for the often ill-chosen allure of magical mysteries?”

“Oh, and a fine ranger you would have been,” Anders replied dryly.

Josidiah shrugged. “My chosen profession is not so different,” he reasoned.

Anders silently agreed. Indeed, the man did see much of his own youthful and idealistic self in the eyes of Josidiah Starym. That was the curious thing about elves, he noted, that this one, who was twice Anders’s present age, reminded him so much of himself when he had but a third his present years.

“When will you begin?” Josidiah asked.

“Begin?” scoffed Anders. “Why, I have been at work over the beast for nearly three weeks, and spent six months before that in preparing the scrolls and powders, the oils, the herbs. Not an easy process, this. And not inexpensive, I might add! Do you know what price a gnome places on the simplest of metal filings, pieces so fine that they might be safely added to the cat’s food?”

Josidiah found that he really did not want to continue along this line of discussion. He did not want to know about the poisoning—and that was indeed what he considered it to be—of the magnificent panther. He looked back to the cat, looked deep into her intense eyes, intelligent so far beyond what he would normally expect.

“Fine day outside,” the bladesinger muttered, not that he believed that Anders would take a moment away from his work to enjoy the weather. “Even my stubborn Uncle Taleisin, Lord Protector of House Starym, wears a face touched by sunshine.”

Anders snorted. “Then he will be smiling this day when he lays low Coronal Eltargrim with a right hook?”

That caught Josidiah off his guard, and he took up Anders’s infectious laughter. Indeed was Taleisin a stubborn and crusty elf, and if Josidiah returned to House Starym this day to learn that his uncle had punched the elf Coronal, he would not be surprised.

“It is a momentous decision that Eltargrim has made,” Anders said suddenly, seriously. “And a brave one. By including the other goodly races, your Coronal has begun the turning of the great wheel of fate, a spin that will not easily be stopped.”

“For good or for ill?”

“That is for a seer to know,” Anders replied with a shrug. “But his choice was the right one, I am sure, though not without its risks.”

The old mage snorted again. “A pity,” he said, “even were I a young man, I doubt I would see the outcome of Eltargrim’s decision, given the way elves measure the passage of time. How many centuries will pass before the Starym even decide if they will accept Eltargrim’s decree?”

That brought another chuckle from Josidiah, but not a long-lived one. Anders had spoken of risks, and certainly there were many. Several prominent families, and not just the Starym, were outraged by the immigration of peoples that many haughty elves considered to be of inferior races. There were even a few mixed marriages, elf and human, within Cormanthor, but any offspring of such unions were surely ostracized.

“My people will come to accept Eltargrim’s wise council,” the elf said at length, determinedly.

“I pray you are right,” said Anders, “for surely Cormanthor will face greater perils than the squabbling of stubborn elves.”

Josidiah looked at him curiously.

“Humans and halflings, gnomes, and most importantly, dwarves, walking among the elves, living in Cormanthor,” Anders muttered. “Why, I would guess that the goblinkin savor the thought of such an occurrence, that all their hated enemies be mixed together into one delicious stew!”

“Together we are many times more powerful,” the bladesinger argued. “Human wizards oft exceed even our own. Dwarves forge mighty weapons, and gnomes create wondrous and useful items, and halflings, yes, even halflings, are cunning allies, and dangerous adversaries.”

“I do not disagree with you,” Anders said, waving his tanned and leathery right hand, three-fingered from a goblin bite, in the air to calm the elf. “And as I have said, Eltargrim chose correctly. But pray you that the internal disputes are settled, else the troubles of Cormanthor will come tenfold from without.”

Josidiah calmed and nodded; he really couldn’t disagree with old Anders’s reasoning, and had, in fact, harbored those same fears for many days. With all the goodly races coming together under one roof, the chaotic goblinkin would have cause to band together in

numbers greater than ever before. If the varied folk of Cormanthor stood together, gaining strength in their diversity, those goblinkin, whatever their numbers, would surely be pushed away. But if the folk of Cormanthor could not see their way to such a day of unity …

Josidiah let the thought hang outside consciousness, put it aside for another day, a day of rain and fog, perhaps. He looked back to the panther and sighed even more sadly, feeling helpless indeed. "Treat the cat well, Anders Beltgarden," he said, and he knew that the old man, once a ranger, would indeed do so.

Josidiah left then, making his way more slowly as he returned to the elven city. He saw Felicity again on the balcony, wearing a slight silken shift and a mischievous, inviting smile, but he passed her by with a wave. The bladesinger suddenly did not feel so much in the mood for play.

Many times in the next few weeks, Josidiah returned to Anders's tower and sat quietly before the cage, silently communing with the panther while the mage went about his work.

"She will be yours when I am done," Anders announced unexpectedly, one day when spring had turned to summer.

Josidiah stared blankly at the old man.

"The cat, I mean," said Anders. "Whiskers will be yours when my work is done."

Josidiah's blue eyes opened wide in horror, though Anders interpreted the look as one of supreme elation.

"She'll do me little use," explained the mage. "I rarely venture out of doors these days, and in truth, have little faith that I will live much more than a few winters longer. Who better to have my most prized creation, I say, than Josidiah Starym, my friend, and he who should have been a ranger?"

"I shall not accept," Josidiah said abruptly, sternly.

Anders's eyes widened in surprise.

"I would be forever reminded of what the cat once was," said the elf, "and what she should be. Whenever I called the slave body to my side, whenever this magnificent creature sat on her haunches, awaiting my command to bring life to her limbs, I would feel that I

had overstepped my bounds as a mortal, that I had played as a god with one undeserving my foolish intervention."

"It's just an animal!" Anders protested.

Josidiah was glad to see that he had gotten through to the old mage, a man the elf knew to be too sensitive for this present undertaking.

"No," said the elf, turning to stare deeply into the panther's knowing eyes. "Not this one." He fell silent, then, and Anders, with a huff of protest, went back to his work, leaving the elf to sit and stare, to silently share his thoughts with the panther.



It was for Josidiah Starym a night of absolute torment, for Anders would complete his work before the moon had set and the great panther would be slain for the sake of a magical item, a mere magical tool. The bladesinger left Cormanthor, heedless of the warnings that had been posted concerning venturing out of the city at night: goblinkin, and enemies even greater, were rumored to be stalking the forest.

Josidiah hardly cared, hardly gave any thoughts to his personal safety. His fate was not in the balance, so it seemed, not like that of the panther.

He thought of going to see Anders, to try one last time to talk the old human out of his designs, but the bladesinger dismissed that notion. He didn't understand humans, he realized, and had indeed lost a bit of faith in the race (and, subsequently, in Eltargrim's decision) because of what he perceived as Anders's failure. The mage, once a ranger and more attuned to the elven ideals than so very many of his rough-edged race, should have known better, should not have sacrificed such a wondrous and intelligent animal as that particular panther, for the sake of magic.

Josidiah moved through the forest, then out of the canopy and under a million stars, shining despite the westering full moon. He reached a treeless hillock. He effortlessly climbed the steep slope through the carpet-thick grass and came to the top of the hill, a private and special place he often used for contemplation.

Then he simply stood and stared upward at the stars, letting his thoughts fly to the greater mysteries, the unknown and never-known, the heavens themselves. He felt mortal suddenly, as though his last remaining centuries were but a passing sigh in the eternal life of the universe.

A sigh that was so much longer, so it seemed, than the remaining life of the panther, if the cat was even still alive.

A subtle rustle at the base of the hillock alerted the elf, brought him from his contemplations. He went into a crouch immediately and stared down at the spot, letting his vision slip into the infrared spectrum.

Heat sources moved about the trees, all along the base of the hill. Josidiah knew them, and thus was not surprised when the forest erupted suddenly and a host of orcs came screaming out of the underbrush, waving weapons, charging the hill and the lone elf, this apparently easy kill.

The lead orcs were right before the crest of the hillock, close enough for Josidiah to see the glistening lines of drool about their tusky faces, when the elf released his fireball. The gouts of flame engulfed that entire side of the hill, shriveling orcs. It was a desperate spell, one Josidiah hated casting in the midst of grasslands, but few options presented themselves. Even as those orcs on the side of the hill fell away into the flames, charred and dying, they were replaced by a second group, charging wildly, and then came a third, from the back side of the hill.

Out came the elf's twin swords, snapping up to the ready. "Cleansing flames!" the elf cried, commanding the powers within his swords. Greenish fires licked at the metal, blurred the distinct lines of the razor-sharp blades.

The closest two orcs, those two who had been right before the elf and had thus escaped the fury of the fireball, skidded in surprise at the sudden appearance of the flaming blades and, for just an instant, let their guards drop.

Too long; Josidiah's left sword slashed across the throat of one, while his right plunged deep into the chest of the second.

The elf spun about, deflecting wide a hurled spear, dodging a second, then picking off a third with a furious down-cut. He dived into a roll and came up charging fast for the back side of the hill, meeting the rush of three monsters, cutting at them wildly before they could get their defenses coordinated.

One fell away, mortally wounded; another lost half of its arm to the searing sweep of the elf's deadly blade. But almost immediately Josidiah was pressed from all sides, orcs stabbing in at him with long spears or rushing forward suddenly to slash with their short, cruel swords.

He could not match weapons with this many, so he moved his flaming blades in purely defensive motions, beginning the chant to let loose another spell.

He took a spear thrust on the side and nearly lost his concentration and his spell. His finely meshed elven chain armor deflected the blow, however, and the elf finished with a twirl, tapping the hilts of his swords together, crying out a word to release the spell. His swords went back up straight, his thumbs came out to touch together, and a burst of flame fanned out from the elf in a half-circle arc.

Without even stopping to witness the effects of his spell, Josidiah spun about, swords slashing across and behind. Ahead charged the bladesinger, a sudden rush of overwhelming fury that broke apart the orcish line and gave Josidiah several openings in the defensive posture of his enemies.

A surge of adrenalin kept the bladesinger moving, dancing and cutting down orcs with a fury. He thought of the panther again, and her undeserved fate, and focused his blame for that act upon these very orcs.

Another fell dead, another atop that one, and many went scrambling down the hill, wanting no part of this mighty warrior.

Soon Josidiah stood quiet, at the ready, a handful of orcs about him, staying out of his reach. But there was something else, the elf sensed, something more evil, more powerful. Something calmed these orcs, lending them confidence, though more than a score of their kin lay dead and another dozen wounded.

The elf sucked in his breath as the newest foes came out onto the open grass. Josidiah realized then his folly. He could defeat a score of orcs, two-score, if he got his spells away first, but these three were not orcs.

These were giants.

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The cat was restless, pacing and growling; Anders wondered if she knew what was to come, knew that this was her last night as a mortal creature. The thought that she might indeed understand shook the old mage profoundly, made all of Josidiah's arguments against this magical transformation echo again in his mind.

The panther roared, and threw herself against the cage door, bouncing back and pacing, growling.

"What are you about?" the old mage asked, but the cat only roared again, angrily, desperately. Anders looked around; what did the cat know? What was going on?

The panther leaped again for the cage door, slamming hard and bouncing away. Anders shook his head, thoroughly confused, for he had never seen the panther like this before—not at all.

"To the Nine Hells with you, elf," the wizard grumbled, wishing he had not revealed Whiskers to Josidiah until the transformation had been completed. He took a deep breath, yelled at the cat to calm down, and drew out a slender wand.

"It will not hurt," Anders promised apologetically. He spoke a word of command, and a greenish ray shot forth from the wand, striking the panther squarely. The cat stopped her pacing, stopped everything, just stood perfectly still, immobilized by the magic of the wand.

Anders took up the figurine and the specially prepared knife, and opened the cage door. He had known from the very start that this was not going to be easy.

He was at the cat's side, the figurine in hand, the knife moving slowly for the creature's throat.

Anders hesitated. "Am I presuming to play the role of a god?" he asked aloud. He looked into those marvelous, intelligent eyes; he

thought of Josidiah, who was indeed much like a ranger, much like Anders had been before devoting his life to ways magical.

Then he looked to the knife, the knife that his hand, his ranger hand, was about to plunge into the neck of this most magnificent creature.

“Oh, damn you, elf!” the mage cried out, and threw the knife across the cage. He began a spell then, one that came to his lips without conscious thought. He hadn’t used this incantation in months, and how he recalled it then, Anders would never know. He cast it forth, powerfully, and all the cabinet doors in his shop, and the door to the hallway, and all the doors in the lower section of the tower, sprang open and wide.

The mage moved to the side of the cage and slumped to a sitting position. Already the great cat was stirring—even the powerful magic of his wand could not hold such a creature as this for long. Anders clutched that wand now, wondering if he might need it again, for his own defense.

The cat shook her head vigorously and took an ambling step, the sensation at last returning to her limbs. She gave Anders a sidelong glance.

The old mage put the wand away. “I played god with you, Whiskers,” he said softly. “Now it is your turn.”

But the panther was preoccupied and hardly gave the wizard a thought as she launched herself from the cage, darting across the room and out into the hallway. She was long gone before Anders ever got to his tower door, and he stood there in the night, lamenting not at all his wasted weeks of effort, his wasted gold.

“Not wasted,” Anders said sincerely, considering the lesson he had just learned. He managed a smile and turned to go back into his tower, then saw the burst of flame, a fireball, mushrooming into the air from the top of a hillock to the north, a place that Anders knew well.

“Josidiah,” he gasped, a reasonable guess indeed. That hillock was Josidiah’s favorite place, a place Anders would expect the elf to go on a night such as this.

Cursing that he had few spells prepared for a confrontation, the old man hustled back into his tower and gathered together a few items.

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His only chance lay in speed, in darting about, never letting his enemies close on him. Even that tactic would only delay the inevitable.

He rushed to the left but had to stop and spin, sensing the pursuit coming from close behind. Backing them off with a sweeping cross of his blades, Josidiah turned and darted left again and, predictably, had to pull up short. This time, though, the elf not only stopped but backtracked, flipping one sword in his hand and stabbing it out behind him, deep into the belly of the closest pursuing orc.

His grim satisfaction at the deft maneuver couldn't hold, however, for even as the dead creature slid from his blade, even as the other few orcs scrambled away down the side of the hill, Josidiah noted the approach of the three giants, fifteen-foot-tall behemoths calmly swinging spiked clubs the size of the elf's entire body.

Josidiah considered the spells remaining to him, tried to find some way to turn them to his advantage.

Nothing; he would have to fight this battle with swords only. And with three giants moving toward him in coordinated fashion, he did not like the odds.

He skittered right, out of the range of a club swipe, then went straight back, away from a second giant, trying to get at the first attacker before it could bring its heavy weapon to bear once more. He would indeed have had the strike, but the third giant cut him off and forced him into a diving roll to avoid a heavy smash.

I must get them to work against each other, the elf thought. To tangle their long limbs with each other.

He put his sword up high and screamed, charging straight for the closest brute, then dipped low under the parrying club and dived into a forward roll. He came to his feet and ran on, right between the giant's widespread legs. Up thrust one sword, out to the side slashed the second, and Josidiah ran out from under the giant,

meeting the attack of one of its companions with a double-bladed deflection, his swords accepting the hit of the club and turning it, barely, to the side and down.

Josidiah's arms were numbed from the sheer weight of the hit; he could not begin to counterattack. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted the sudden rush of the third giant and knew his daring attack on the first had put him in a precarious position indeed. He scrambled out to the side, threw himself into yet another roll as he saw the club come up high.

But this giant was a smart one, and it held the strike as it closed another long, loping stride. Josidiah rolled right over a second time and a third, but he could not get out of range, not this time.

The giant roared. Up went the club, high and back over its head, and Josidiah started a sidelong scramble, but stopped, startled, as a huge black spear—a spear?—flew over him.

No, it was not a spear, the bladesinger realized, but a panther, the old mage's cat! She landed heavily on the giant's chest, claws grabbing a firm hold, maw snapping for the stunned monster's face. Back the behemoth stumbled, overbalanced, and down the giant went, the panther riding it all the way to the ground.

The cat was in too close for any strike, so the giant let go of its club and tried to grab at the thing. The panther's front claws held fast, though, while her back legs began a running rake, tearing through the giant's bearskin tunic and then through the giant's own skin.

Josidiah had no time to stop and ask how, or why, or anything else. He was back on his feet, another giant closing fast. The one he had hit shuffled to join in as well. Out to the side rushed the bladesinger, trying to keep one giant in front of the other, trying to fight them one at a time.

He ducked a lumbering swing, ducked again as the club rushed past from a vicious backhand, then hopped high, tucking his legs as the giant came swiping across a third time, this time predictably low. And getting the club so low meant that the giant was bending near to the ground. Josidiah landed in a run, charging forward,

getting inside the range of the coming backhand and sticking the monster, once, twice, right in the face.

It howled and fell away, and its companion shuffled in, one hand swinging the club, the other clutching its torn loins.

A sudden blast, a lightning stroke, off to the side of the hill, temporarily blinded both elf and giant, but Josidiah did not need his eyes to fight. He waded right in, striking hard.

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The giant's hand closed on the cat, but the agile panther twisted about suddenly, biting hard, taking off three fingers, and the behemoth fostered no further thoughts of squeezing its foe. It merely shoved hard with its other hand, pushing the cat from its chest. The giant rolled about, grabbing for its club, knowing it must get to its feet before the cat came back in.

No chance of that; the panther hit the ground solidly, all four claws digging a firm hold, every muscle snapping taut to steal, to reverse the cat's momentum. Turf went flying as the panther pivoted and leaped, hitting the rising giant on the head, latching on, biting, and raking.

The behemoth wailed in agony and dropped its club again. It flailed at the cat with both arms and scored several heavy blows. But the panther would not let go, great fangs tearing deep holes in the behemoth's flesh, mighty claws erasing the features from the giant's face.

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Josidiah came up square against his one opponent, the giant bleeding from several wounds, but far from finished. Its companion moved in beside it, shoulder to shoulder.

Then another form crested the hill, a hunched, human form, and the second giant turned to meet this newest enemy.

"It took you long enough to get here," the elf remarked sarcastically.

"Orcs in the woods," Anders explained. "Pesky little rats."

The human had no apparent defenses in place, and so the giant waded right in, taking up its club in both hands. Anders paid it little heed, beginning a chant for another spell.

The club swished across, and Josidiah nearly cried out, thinking Anders was about to be batted a mile from the hilltop.

The giant might as well have hit the side of a stone mountain. The club slammed hard against Anders's shoulder and simply bounced off. Anders didn't even blink, never stopped his chanting.

"Oh, I do love that spell," the old mage remarked between syllables of his present casting.

"Stoneskin," Josidiah said dryly. "Do teach it to me."

"And this one, too," Anders added, laughing. He finished his present casting, throwing his arms down toward the ground at the giant's feet. Immediately, earth began flying wildly, as though a dozen giants with huge spades were digging furiously at the spot. When it ended, the giant was standing in a hole, its eyes even with those of the wizard.

"That's more fair," Anders remarked.

The giant howled and moved to raise its club, but found the hole too constricting for it to properly get the weapon up high. The wizard began yet another chant, holding his hand out toward the monster, pointing one finger right between the giant's eyes and bending the digit to show the giant a bejeweled ring.

With its weapon tangled in the tight quarters of the hole, the monster improvised, snapping its head forward and biting hard the wizard's extended hand.

Again, Anders hardly finished, and the giant groaned loudly, one tooth shattered by the impact.

Anders thrust his hand forward, putting the ring barely an inch from the monster's open mouth and loosing the magic of his ring. Balls of lightning popped forth, into the open mouth, lighting up the behemoth's head.

"Ta da!" said the old mage, bending his legs, more of a curtsy than a bow, and throwing his arms out wide, palms up, as the giant slumped down into the hole.

"And the grave is already dug," Anders boasted.

The second giant had seen enough, and started for the side of the hill, but Josidiah would not let it get away so easily. The bladesinger sprinted right behind, sheathing one sword. He let the giant get far enough down the hillside so that when he leaped for it, he came in even with the monster's bulbous nose. He held fast and brought his sword arm in hard around the other side, slashing deep into the monster's throat. The giant tried to reach up and grab the elf, but suddenly it was gasping, stumbling, skidding to its knees, and sliding down the hill.

Josidiah's sword arm pumped furiously, widening the wound, tearing at the brute's arteries and windpipe. He pushed away as the giant tumbled facedown, coming to a standing position atop the monster's back. It was still alive, still gasping, but the wound was mortal, Josidiah knew, and so he turned back for the hilltop.

Anders's self-congratulatory smile was short-lived, dissipating as soon as the mage looked to the battered panther. The cat had done her work well—the giant lay dead on the ground—but she had been battered in the process and lay awkwardly, breath coming in forced gasps, backbone obviously shattered.

Anders ran to the panther's side; Josidiah joined him there a moment later.

"Do something!" the elf pleaded.

"There is nothing I can do," Anders protested.

"Send the cat back into the figurine," Josidiah said. "She should be whole again when she returns."

Anders turned on the elf, grabbed him by the front of his tunic. "I have not completed the spell," he cried, and only then did it hit the mage. What had brought the panther out here? Why would a panther, a wild panther, run to the aid of an elf?

"I never got close to finishing," the mage said more calmly, letting go of the elf. "I just let her go."

Josidiah turned his wide-eyed stare from Anders to the panther. The questions were obvious then; neither the elf nor the mage bothered to speak them aloud.

"We must get her back to my tower," Anders said.

Josidiah's expression remained incredulous. How were they to carry six hundred pounds of limp cat all the way back to the tower?

But Anders had an answer for that. He took out a swatch of black velvet and unfolded it several times, until he had a patch of blackness several feet in diameter on the hilltop. Then the mage lifted one side of the cloth and gently eased it against the rear of the panther.

Josidiah blinked, realizing that the cat's tail had disappeared into the cloth!

"Lift her as I pass this over her," Anders begged. Josidiah did just that, lifting the cat inch by inch as the mage moved the cloth along. The panther was swallowed up by the blackness.

"Extradimensional hole," the mage explained, slipping it forward to engulf the cat's head. Then he laid the cloth flat once more and carefully folded it back to a size that would fit in his pocket. "She is quite fine," he said. "Well, except for the giant's wounds."

"Wondrous toys, wizard," Josidiah congratulated.

"Spoils of adventuring," Anders replied with a wink. "You should get out more."

The mirth could not hold as the pair ran off, back for Beltgarden Home. What might they do there but make the dying cat comfortable, after all?

Anders did just that, opening his portable hole and gently easing the panther part of the way out of it. He stopped short, though, and Josidiah winced, understanding that the cat was drawing her last breaths.

"Perhaps I can finish the figurine enchantment," Anders reasoned. He looked sympathetically to Josidiah. "Be gone," he said, "for I must slay the cat quickly, mercifully."

Josidiah shook his head, determined to bear witness to the transformation, to the mortal end of this most wondrous cat, to this intelligent panther that had come, unbidden, to his rescue. How might the elf explain the bond that had grown between him and the cat? Had Anders's magical preparation imparted a sense of loyalty to the panther, given her the beginnings of that mindless slavery she would have known as a magical tool?

Josidiah looked once more into the cat's eyes and knew that was not the case. Something else had happened here, something of a higher order, though perhaps in part facilitated by the magic of Anders's preparation.

Anders moved quickly to retrieve the figurine and placed it beside the dying panther. "You will take the figurine," he said to Josidiah.

"I cannot," the bladesinger replied, for he could not bear to see the panther in the subsequent lessened form, could not bear to take the cat as his slave.

Anders did not argue—there was no time for that. He poured some enchanted oil over the cat's head, weaving his magic, and placed his hand over the panther's eyes.

"I name you Whiskers," he began, putting his dagger against the animal's throat.

"No!" Josidiah shouted, rushing beside the mage, grabbing the man's hand and pulling the dagger away. "Not Whiskers, never that!"

Josidiah looked to the cat, into the marvelous yellow-green eyes, shining intently still, though the moment of death was upon her. He studied the animal, the beautiful, silent friend. "Shadow," he declared.

"No, not shadow," said Josidiah, and he held back the dagger once more. "The high elvish word for shadow." He looked right into the cat's eyes, searching for some confirmation. He had not chosen this name, he suddenly understood; this had been the panther's name all along.

"Guenhwyvar."

As soon as he uttered the name, there came a black flash, like the negative image of one of Anders's lightning bolts. Gray mist filled the room; the cloth swatch contracted and disappeared altogether, and then the panther, too, was gone, dissipating into nothingness.

Anders and Josidiah fell back, sitting side by side. It seemed for a moment that there was a profound line of emptiness in the room, a rift in the universe, as though the fabric of the planes of existence had been torn asunder. But then it was gone, everything—panther, hole, and rift, and all that remained was the figurine.

“What did you do?” Josidiah asked the mage.

“I?” balked Anders. “What did you do?”

Josidiah moved cautiously to retrieve the figurine. With it in hand, he looked back to Anders, who nodded slowly in agreement.

“Guenhwyvar,” the elf called nervously.

A moment later, the area beside the elf filled with the gray mist, swirling and gradually taking the shape of the panther. She was breathing more easily, as though her wounds were fast on the mend. She looked up at Josidiah, and the elf’s breath fell away, lost in the intensity, the intelligence, of that gaze.

This was no slave, no magical tool; this was the panther, the same wondrous panther!

“How did you do this?” the elf asked.

“I know not,” Anders replied. “And I do not even know what I, what we, have done, with the figurine. It is the statuette that transforms into the living beast, and yet, the cat is here, and so is the statuette!” The old mage chuckled, locking gazes with the elf. “Send her away to heal,” he bade.

Josidiah looked to the cat. “Go, Guenhwyvar, but I shall summon you forth again, I promise.”

The panther growled, but it was not an angry sound, and she began a slow, limping pace, melting away into gray mist.

“That is the joy of magic,” Anders said. “The mystery of it all. Why, even the greatest wizards could not explain this, I should guess. Perhaps all of my preparation, perhaps the magic of the hole —ah, yes, my dear, lost hole!—perhaps the combination of all these things.

“The joy of the mysteries,” he finished. “Very well, then, give it to me.” And he held out his hand for the figurine, but Josidiah clutched it all the tighter.

“Never,” the elf said with a smile, and Anders smiled, as well.

“Indeed,” said the mage, hardly surprised. “But you will pay for my lost hole, and for my time and effort.”

“Gladly,” said the elf, and he knew, holding that statuette, holding the key to the wondrous black panther, to Guenhwyvar, whom Josidiah realized would be his most loyal companion and friend for

all the rest of his days, that it would be the most worthwhile gold he ever spent.

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That Curious Sword

That Curious Sword" marked a new purpose for short stories in my Forgotten Realms contributions. I didn't go into my previous contract discussions with any plans to do more short stories—at least not to commit to any. I figured that if the mood hit me, I'd write one, and if Wizards of the Coast then wanted to publish it, great! But book programs which include anthologies don't necessarily work that way, so in the contract negotiations, I agreed to the five stories. I did so because the Drizzt books were splitting into two distinct lines. Entreri and Jarlaxle had struck out on their own; we even removed *Servant of the Shard* from "Paths of Darkness" and put it with "The Sellswords" trilogy instead.

Because of that, I didn't resist the "companion" short story idea in those negotiations. I knew that if I went off on a "Drizzt" trilogy, I would be leaving Entreri and Jarlaxle behind for three years or more, and I certainly didn't want that. I felt as if I was finally beginning to understand Artemis Entreri when I penned *Promise of the Witch King*, and he was a character I intended to learn from as I learned "of" him. My joy as a writer is to go down those side streets with characters who surprise me, after all.

The short story format worked particularly well for Entreri and Jarlaxle at this time. I could put them in specific dangerous situations, pressuring them in particular ways, and allow their reactions to tell me more about not only their individual characters, but about how they felt about each other—and to me, that was the more important question. Neither of these guys is particularly

trustworthy or altruistic. What might a friendship between such characters really mean? Would it wholly depend on continued and demonstrable mutual benefit, or would there come a point when it morphed into something deeper, something more honest, something less tangible in terms of provable "gain," be it monetary or the accumulation of power?

So it is with "That Curious Sword." The story serves to advance the storylines around Entreri and Jarlaxle, mostly, bringing in the impending return of the Netherese Empire and the implications to Entreri, since he holds a powerful Netherese sword as his own. There is also the little matter of the implications of stabbing a shade with a vampiric dagger …

In addition, we see the limitations and the possibilities of the friendship between this unlikely pair as they continue to make their way through the Realms. Hopefully this and the other two stories of the dynamic duo serve to enhance the culmination of that relationship in *Road of the Patriarch*.





The Year of the Shield (1367 DR)

"It is not so different from Calimport," Artemis Entreri insisted, somewhat stubbornly.

Across the table from him, Jarlaxle merely chuckled.

"And you call my people xenophobic," the dark elf replied. "At least we are not so racist toward others of our own species!"

"You talk the part of the fool."

"I talked my way into the city, did I not?" Jarlaxle replied with that mischievous grin of his.

It was true enough. He and Entreri had come north and east, to the region known as the Bloodstone Lands. There, word had it, adventurers could do a fine business in goblin ears and the like, taken from the wild lands of Vaasa to the north of the kingdom of Damara and this city, Damara's capital, Heliogabalus. Liberally invoking the name of Gareth Dragonsbane, and reminding the city guards that the Paladin King of Damara was a man known for tolerance and understanding, a man known for judging all people by their actions and not their heritage, the dark elf had convinced the city's stern protectors to allow him entry.

They had agreed mostly because Jarlaxle was like no other dark elf they had ever heard of—and none of them had ever seen one. Outrageously dressed with a flamboyant wide-brimmed hat capped by a huge purple feather, a flowing cape—blue on the day he had entered the city, since turned red—an eye patch that daily changed from eye to eye, and with no apparent weapons, the drow seemed more a conversation piece than any threat to the security of the great city. They had let him and Entreri, with his magnificent sword

and jeweled dagger, enter the city, but had promised to watch over them carefully.

After a couple of hours, the assassin and the drow knew that promise was one the lazy guards didn't intend to keep.

"You're taking far too long!" Entreri yelled across the somewhat crowded tavern, at the hapless waitress who had taken their order for drinks and food.

They knew she was in no hurry to return to them, for she had been trembling visibly at the sight of a drow elf all the time she was trying to concentrate on their words.

The woman blanched and started toward the bar, then turned around, then turned around again, as if she didn't know what to do. At a nearby table, a pair of men looked from her to Entreri, their expressions sour.

The assassin sat calmly, almost hoping that the pair would make a move. He was in an especially foul mood over the last couple of months, ever since he and Jarlaxle had destroyed the Crystal Shard. The road had been boring and uneventful, even with his flamboyant companion, and Jarlaxle's plan to come to the Bloodstone Lands to make a reputation and some coin by killing goblins and other monsters sounded more to Entreri like a job for his former arch-nemesis Drizzt and his "gallant" friends.

Still, Entreri had to admit that their options were a bit limited, since Calimport was shut off to them and they'd have a hard time truly establishing themselves in the bowery of any other city.

"You've flustered her," Jarlaxle remarked.

Entreri just shrugged.

"You know, my friend, there is a saying among the drow nobles that if someone treats you well but is wicked to the peasants, then he is truly a wicked person. Now, in my society, that is a compliment, but here?"

Entreri sat back and lifted the front of his round, thin-brimmed hat —Jarlaxle called it a "bolero"—high above his eyes, so that the drow could clearly see his stare, could see the skepticism in his dark eyes.

"Do not pretend you don't care," Jarlaxle said against that smirk.

“Now my conscience is a dark elf?” Entreri asked incredulously. “How low must I have sunk.”

“Artemis Entreri is a better man than to whip a serving girl,” was all Jarlaxle said, pointedly turning away.

With a frustrated growl, Entreri shoved back from the table and started across the room, his small form moving silently and gracefully, almost as if he was floating across the room, heading for the serving girl. He passed the table with the two loud onlookers, and one of them started to stand as if to block the way, but a look from Entreri, so cold and strong, was enough to alter that plan.

“You,” Entreri called to the girl.

She stopped, and everything in the place seemed to come to a complete halt, all conversations ending abruptly.

Well, except for the knowing chuckle from a peculiar-looking dark elf at the back of the room.

The serving girl slowly turned to watch Entreri’s approach. He moved right up to her and fell to one knee.

“I beg your pardon, good lady,” he apologized.

He held out his hand and dropped a few gold coins onto her tray.

The young woman stared at him in disbelief.

Entreri came up from his bow to stand before her. “I expect that you’ve forgotten what we ordered,” he said. “Which is understandable, given the …” he paused and glanced back at Jarlaxle, then finished, “… unusual look of my friend. I will tell you our preferences again, and with my apologies for not seeing your dilemma earlier.”

All around him, the patrons went back to their private conversations. The waitress beamed a great smile, obviously relieved.

Entreri started to go on, to ask her forgiveness, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to do that.

“My thanks,” he said, and he reiterated the order, then turned back and rejoined Jarlaxle.

“Wonderful!” the dark elf said. “I do believe that I will have you in a paladin’s order within a year!”

Entreri narrowed his dark eyes, to which Jarlaxle only laughed.

“Thinked I was gonna have to kick yer arse outta here,” came a voice from the side.

The companions turned to see the innkeeper, a burly older man who looked like a good portion of his chest had slipped to his belly. Still, the large man held an imposing aura about him. Before either of them could take his words as a threat or an insult, though, the man widened a crooked, gap-toothed smile at them.

“Was glad ye made me girl, Kitzy, happy.” He pulled out a chair, reversed it, then straddled it, placing his huge elbows on the table and leaning forward. “So what’s bringing a pair like you to Heliogabalus?”

“I just wanted to see a city that could boast of such a stupid name,” Entreri quipped, and the innkeeper howled and slapped his thigh.

“We have heard that there is fame and fortune to be made in this country,” Jarlaxle said in all seriousness, “for those strong enough and cunning enough to find it.”

“And that’d be yerself?”

“Some might think so,” the dark elf replied, and he gave a shrug. “As you can imagine, it is not easy for one of my heritage to gain acceptance. Perhaps this is an opportunity worth investigating.”

“A hero drow?”

“You have, perhaps, heard of Drizzt Do’Urden?” Jarlaxle asked.

Once before, he had tried to use that name for himself, to impress some farmers who, it turned out, had never heard of the unusual drow warrior of Icewind Dale.

Entreri watched his friend’s performance with budding anger, recognizing the ploy for what it was. Jarlaxle had been frustrated with his inability to impersonate Drizzt, or at least, with the lack of gain he would derive from impersonating someone that no one had ever heard of, but perhaps if this man knew of Drizzt, Jarlaxle could assume the identity anew, and begin this phase of his journey a bit higher on the feeding chain of Heliogabalus.

“Drizzit Dudden?” the man echoed badly, scratching his head. “Nope, can’t say that I have. He another drow?”

“Another corpse,” Entreri put in, and he shot Jarlaxle a glare, not appreciating that Jarlaxle kept bringing up that one’s name.

Artemis Entreri was done with Drizzt. He had beaten the drow in their last encounter—with help from a dark elf psionicist—but more importantly than killing Drizzt, Entreri had exorcised the demon within himself, the need to ever deal with that one again.

“It does not matter,” Jarlaxle said, apparently catching the cue and bringing the conversation back in place.

“So ye’re here to make a name for yerselfs, eh? I expect ye’ll be headin’ up Vaasa way.”

“I expect that you ask too many questions,” said Entreri, and Jarlaxle tossed him another scowl.

“You do seem rather inquisitive,” the drow added, mostly to downplay Entreri’s tone.

“Well that’s me business,” the innkeeper replied. “Folks’ll be askin’ me about the strange pair that came through.”

“Strange?” Entreri asked.

“Ye got a drow elf with ye.”

“True enough.”

“So if ye’re tellin’ me yer tale, then ye’re really saving yerselfs some trouble,” the innkeeper went on.

“The town herald,” Jarlaxle said dryly.

“That’s me business.”

“Well, it is as we have already told you,” the dark elf replied. He stood up and offered a polite bow. “I am Jarlaxle, and this is my friend, Artemis Entreri.”

As the innkeeper replied with the customary “Well met,” Entreri put another frown on and glowered at the dark elf, hardly believing that Jarlaxle had just given out their names. The innkeeper offered his name in reply, which Entreri didn’t bother to catch, then began telling them a few tales about men who had gone up to fight in Vaasa, which interested Entreri even less. Then, after a call from the bar area, the man excused himself and walked away.

“What?” Jarlaxle asked against Entreri’s frown.

“You are so willing to give out our identities?”

“Why would I not be?”

Entreri's expression showed clearly that the reasons should be obvious.

"There is nobody chasing us, my friend. We haven't earned the anger of the authorities—not in this region, at least. Were you not known in Calimport as Artemis Entreri? Do not be ashamed of your name!"

Entreri just shook his head, sat back, and took a sip of his wine. This whole adventure on the road was too out of place for him still.

Some time later, the inn clearing out of the nightly patrons, the innkeeper ambled back over to the pair.

"So, when're ye off to Vaasa?" he asked.

Entreri and Jarlaxle exchanged knowing looks—the way the man had spoken the words showed it to be a leading question.

"Soon, I would expect," Jarlaxle replied, nibbling at the bait. "Our funds are running low."

"Ah, ye're lookin' for work already," said the innkeeper. "Killin' goblins only? Well, goblins and orcs, I mean? Or are ye in the game for more subtle forms?"

"You presume much," said Entreri.

"True enough, but ye're not tellin' me that ye're fighters of the open road, now are ye?"

"Would you like to see?" Entreri offered.

"Oh, I'm not doubtin' ye!" the man said with a broad grin. He held his huge paws up before him, warding the dangerous man away. "But ye look like a pair who might be doing better work for better pay, if ye get me meaning."

"And if we do not?"

The innkeeper looked at Entreri curiously.

"If we do not get your meaning," Jarlaxle explained.

"Ah, well, there're plenty of jobs about Heliogabalus," the innkeeper explained. "For the right crew, I mean. The authorities are all up at the wall in Vaasa, fighting monsters, but that leaves many citizens wronged back here in town, with nowhere to turn."

Entreri didn't even try to hide his smirk, and in truth, just hearing the man ramble on made him feel a bit more at home. Heliogabalus, after all, wasn't so different from Calimport, where the laws of the

land and the laws of the street were two very different codes. He could hardly believe that he and Jarlaxle had been sought out so quickly, though, with no reputation preceding them, but he didn't think too much about it. Likely, most of the fighters of the region were away in the north, along with most of those who had made their living by keeping order on the street, as well, whatever order that might be.

"And you know of these jobs?" Jarlaxle asked the man.

"Well, that's me business!" said the innkeeper. "In truth, I'm a bit short o' help right now, and I got a friend askin' me to hire out a job."

"And what makes you think that we are capable of such a job?" Jarlaxle asked.

"When ye been doin' this as long as ol' Feepun here, ye get to know the look," he explained. "I watch the way ye walk. I see the way ye lift yer drinks, the way that one's eyes keep movin' side-to-side, watchin' everything about him. Oh, I'm guessin' that the work I have for ye, if ye want it, will be far beneath yer true talents, but it's a place to start." He paused and looked hopefully at the pair.

"Well, pray tell us of this job," Jarlaxle prompted after a lengthy pause. "Nothing against the law of the land, you understand," he added, a typical and expected disclaimer that any self-respecting thief or assassin would be quick to add.

"Oh, no, not that," Feepun said with a laugh. "A bit of justice sorted out, that's all."

Jarlaxle and Entreri exchanged knowing smirks—that was the common disclaimer response, usually meaning that someone either deserved to die, or to be robbed.

"Got me a friend who's lookin' to get an idol back," the innkeeper explained, leaning in and whispering. "He's paying good, too. Hundred gold pieces for one night's work. Ye up for it?"

"Keep talking," said Jarlaxle.

"Seems he's had a dispute over a little statue. Got stolen by a guy near here. He wants it back."

"How do you know that we are capable of doing this?" Entreri asked.

“Telled ye I knowed how to read me guests. I think ye can. Shouldn’t be too hard a job, though this thief, Rorli, is a nasty one.”

“Perhaps a hundred is not enough, then,” Jarlaxle put in.

The innkeeper shrugged. “Said he’d give a hundred. Seems like a fair price to me. I can ask—”

“First tell us the particulars,” Entreri interrupted. “We have much to do, and need to buy supplies for the road north.”

The innkeeper grinned and leaned in even closer, detailing all he knew of Rorli, including the location of the man’s apartment, which was not far away. Then, on the request of Jarlaxle and Entreri, the innkeeper left them alone for a bit.

“It might be fun,” Jarlaxle said when he and his friend were alone.

“Might get us killed, or get Rorli killed.”

The dark elf shrugged, as if that hardly mattered. “A hundred gold is a pittance,” he said, “but so begins a reputation that might suit us well, perhaps.”

“Give me a hundred gold now, so I might buy the items I’ll need for the work,” Entreri said.

Grinning widely, Jarlaxle reached into a tiny pouch and pulled forth some coins, then some more and some more—more than the purse could possibly hold, except that it contained an extra-dimensional pocket within—until Entreri had closer to two hundred.

“And we’re doing this for a hundred?” the assassin asked skeptically.

“The things you buy will be reusable, yes?”

“Yes.”

“An investment, then.”

It occurred to Entreri that his companion was enjoying this a bit too much. He knew that usually meant trouble.

Still, he shrugged and motioned for the innkeeper to come back.

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Deftly working his housebreaker harness and the ropes he had set with a grapnel on the building’s roof, Entreri scaled the two-story structure, setting himself at the ledge of the second story window that he knew from observation to be Rorli’s bedroom. A quick check

had him confident that there were no pressure traps on this side of the glass.

In perfect balance and with amazing dexterity, the thief pulled forth his other newly-acquired tools, pressing a suction cup delicately against the center of the glass, then attaching a swivel arm, with its diamond-tipped glass cutter. He traced a perfect circle and tugged lightly, though the cut piece didn't immediately pull free.

Jarlaxle calmly levitated up beside him. "An interesting contraption for one who cannot levitate," the dark elf said, indicating the harness.

"I make do," Entreri replied.

"But such a waste of money for the darksuit," the drow went on, shaking his head and sighing. "The cloak I gave you is far more effective, and the hat even more than that."

Entreri knew he shouldn't be surprised by anything Jarlaxle said concerning magic items, and he had been fairly convinced that the cloak he wore was some improved version of the concealing drow *piwafwi*. The remark about the hat, though, had him completely off guard.

"The hat?" he asked. He brought his free hand up to the short and stiff brim of his bolero.

"Tip it down and to the left with your left hand and it will shield you from prying eyes."

Entreri did as the drow instructed and an immediate chill washed over him, bringing a shudder.

"There," Jarlaxle announced. "When you feel warm again, just tip the hat."

"I feel like a corpse."

"Better to feel like one than to be one."

Entreri tipped his hat in agreement, and shuddered again, then went back to his work on the window, this time popping the cut circle of glass free.

"Tight fit," Jarlaxle said dryly.

The assassin tossed him a smirk and gingerly reached through the glass, moving his hand slowly and gently, so gently, about the pane

in search of a trap.

"Seems like a lot of work," said Jarlaxle.

He reached up to his huge hat and pulled forth a small black piece of cloth. Seeing it, Entreri just lowered his head and sighed, for he knew what was coming.

Jarlaxle spun the cloth about and it elongated, grew larger and larger. The drow threw it against the wall, and the whole area of the structure that the black circle covered simply disappeared. The typical portable hole, a rare and valuable item, created an extra-dimensional pocket, but, as with most of his items, Jarlaxle's device was far from typical. Depending upon which side the drow threw down, the portable hole would either create the pocket, or simply put a temporary hole in whatever surface it had struck. Jarlaxle casually stepped into the room, and pulled his hole in behind him, securing the wall once more.

So flustered was Entreri that he almost moved too quickly across the trapped part of the window pane, feeling the slight lump that indicated a pressure trap. Regaining his wits, the man's hand worked with perfect movements, and in seconds, he had the trap disarmed, and even opened, revealing a small needle, no doubt poisoned.

He had it free and safely stuck through his cuff in a few more seconds, then finished his check of the window, clicked the lock, and entered the room.

"At least I put the wall back," Jarlaxle quipped, indicating the circle of glass in Entreri's hand.

A flick of the assassin's wrist sent the glass piece crashing to the floor.

"So much for secrecy," said Jarlaxle.

"Maybe I'm in the mood to kill someone," Entreri replied, staring hard at the frustrating dark elf.

Jarlaxle shrugged.

Entreri scanned the room. A door was set in the wall across from the window, in the corner to the left, with an open closet beside it. Halfway down the wall to the right of the window stood a chest of drawers, as high as Entreri's shoulder. A bed and night table across

from the bureau completed the furnishings. Entreri went for the chest of drawers as Jarlaxle moved to the closet.

"Poor taste," he heard the dark elf say, and turned to see Jarlaxle rifling through the hanging clothes, most of them drab and gray.

Entreri shook his head and pulled open the bottom drawer, finding some linens, and under them, a small pouch of coins, which disappeared into his pocket. The next drawer was much the same, and the third one up held assorted toiletry items, including a beautiful bone comb, its handle made of pearl. He took that, too.

The top drawer held the most curious items: a couple of jars of salves and a trio of potion bottles, each filled with a different colored liquid. Entreri nodded knowingly, and looked back to the window, then he shut the drawer and moved along to check the bed.

"Ah, a secret compartment," Jarlaxle said from the closet.

"Let me inspect it for traps."

"No need," said the dark elf.

He stepped back and produced a silver whistle, hung about his neck on a chain. Two short blows and there came a *pop* and a flash as the secret compartment magically opened.

"You have an answer for everything," Entreri remarked.

"Keeps me alive. Ah, yes, and look what we have here."

A moment later, Jarlaxle walked out of the closet carrying a small statuette, a curious figurine of a muscular man, half white, half black.

"Back to the inn and our reward?" Jarlaxle asked.

In response, the statue began laughing at him. "Doubtful you will be going anywhere, Artemis Entreri!" it said, and the fact that it was addressing Entreri and not Jarlaxle tipped both off that the speech had been pre-programmed, and with foreknowledge of the assassin.

"Um …" Entreri remarked.

The door to the room opened then, and Jarlaxle fell back toward the window. Entreri stayed to his left, over by the bed. In stepped a muscular, dark-skinned man dressed in long and ragged-edged black robes, a many-crested helm on his head. Behind him loomed a horde of huge gray and black dogs, blending in and out of the shadows in

the hallway as if they were made of the same indistinct stuff as those patches of blackness.

Entreri felt a pull from his belt, from Charon's Claw, his magnificent sword. It didn't feel to him as if the sword was relating its eagerness for battle, though, as it usually did, but rather, almost as if it was greeting an old friend.

"I take it you were expecting us," Jarlaxle calmly stated, and he presented the statue as his proof.

"If you give it over without a struggle, you may find us to be important allies," the large man said.

"Well, I am not endeared to it just yet," Jarlaxle replied with a grin. "We could discuss price—"

"Not that worthless idol!"

"The sword," Entreri reasoned.

"And the gauntlet," the man confirmed.

Entreri scoffed at him. "But they are better allies to me than you could ever be."

"Ah, yes, but are they as terrible foes as we?"

"Us? We?" Jarlaxle cut in. "Who are you? And I mean that in the plural sense, not the singular."

Both the dark man and Entreri looked at the drow curiously.

"The sword your friend carries does not belong to him," the dark man said to Jarlaxle.

The drow looked to Entreri and asked, "Did you kill the former owner?"

"What do you think?"

Jarlaxle nodded and looked back to the dark man. "It is his."

"It is Netherese!"

Entreri didn't quite know what that meant, but when he looked to Jarlaxle and saw the drow's eyes opened very wide, as wide as they had been when the pair had encountered the dragon to destroy the Crystal Shard, he knew that there might be a bit of trouble.

"Netherese?" the drow echoed. "A people long gone."

"A people soon to be returned," the dark man assured him. "A people seeking their former glory, and their former possessions."

“Well, there is the best news the world has heard in a millennium,” Jarlaxle said sarcastically, to which the dark man only laughed.

“I have been sent to retrieve the sword,” he explained. “I could have killed you outright, and without question, but it occurred to me that two companions such as yourselves might prove to be very valuable allies to Sh—my people, as we shall be to you.”

“How valuable?” asked Jarlaxle, obviously intrigued.

“And if I ally with you, then I get to keep the sword?” Entreri asked.

“No,” the dark man answered Entreri.

“Then no,” Entreri answered back.

“Let us not be hasty,” said the deal-maker drow.

“Seems pretty simple to me,” said Entreri.

“Then to me, as well,” said the dark man. “The hard way, then. As you wish!”

As he finished, he stepped aside, and the pack of great dogs charged into the room, howling madly, their white teeth gleaming in stark contrast against the blackness of them.

Entreri fell into a crouch, ready to spring aside, but Jarlaxle took matters under control, tossing out before the dogs the same portable hole he had used to enter the room.

With howls turning to yelps, the beasts disappeared through the floor, tumbling to the room below. Jarlaxle bent immediately and scooped up the hole, sealing the floor above them.

“I have to get one of those,” Entreri remarked.

“If you do, don’t jump into mine with it,” said Jarlaxle.

Entreri fixed him with a puzzled expression.

“Rift … astral … you don’t want to know,” Jarlaxle assured him.

“Right. Now, where does that leave us?” the assassin asked the shade.

“It leaves you with an enemy you do not understand!” the dark man replied.

He laughed and moved to the side, disappearing so quickly, so completely into the shadows that it seemed a trick of the eyes to Entreri. Still, the assassin did manage to flick his fingers, and knew

his tiny missile had struck home when he heard a slight chirp from the man.

"You favor the darkness, drow?" the dark man asked, and as he finished, the room went perfectly black.

"I do!" Jarlaxle responded, and he blew on the whistle again: a short burst, a long one, and another short one. Entreri heard the door slam.

It was all happening quickly, and purely on instinct, the assassin drew out his sword and his jeweled dagger and moved protectively back against the bed. He tipped his cap again, though he understood this to be magical darkness, impenetrable even by those who had the ability to see in the dark. It was fortunate he did, though, for right after the chill enshrouded his body, he felt the sudden intense heat of a fireball filling the room.

He was down and under the bed in an instant, then came out the other side as the burning mattress collapsed.

"Caster!" he yelled.

"Seriously?" came Jarlaxle's sarcastic reply.

"Seriously," came the dark man's cry. "And I fear not your little stings!"

"Really?" Entreri asked him, and he was moving as he spoke, trying hard not to give the dark man any definitive target. "Even from your own window need—?"

His last word was cut short, though, as complete silence engulfed the room. Profound, magical silence that quieted even the yelping and howling dogs below. Entreri knew that it was Jarlaxle's doing, the drow's standard opening salvo against dangerous magic-users. Without the ability to use verbal components, a wizard's repertoire was severely limited.

But now Entreri had to worry about himself, for his magical sword began a sudden assault upon his sensibilities, compelling him to turn the blade back on himself and take his own life. He had already fought this struggle of wills with the stubborn weapon, but with an apparent representative of its creators nearby, the sword seemed even angrier.

But the assassin wore the gauntlet, which minimized the effect the sword could have on him, and he was able to hold the upper hand—somewhat. For he also had to keep exact track of where he was in the room. He had one good shot because of his previous actions and words, he knew, and to miss the opportunity would make this situation even more dangerous.

He aligned himself with the heat emanating from the bed, turned in the direction he guessed to be perfectly perpendicular to the window, then took three definitive strides across the room, finally sheathing the stubborn sword as he went.

He struck once, he struck fast, and he struck true, right into the back of the dark man, his vampiric, life-stealing jeweled dagger diving in deep.

A strange feeling engulfed Entreri as the dagger pumped forth the life force of the dying man, dizzying and disorienting. He fell back, then stumbled silently to the floor, and lay there for a long while.

Soon after, he heard the dogs barking again from below.

"It's over," he announced, fearing that Jarlaxle would drop another silence on the room.

A moment later, the darkness lifted as well. Lying on the floor, Entreri looked straight up to see his dark elf companion similarly lying on the ceiling, hands tucked comfortably behind his head. Entreri also noticed that the scarring on the walls and ceiling ended in a bubble about the drow, as if he had enacted some shield that magic, or the fireball, at least, could not affect.

The assassin wasn't surprised.

"Well done," Jarlaxle congratulated, floating down gently to the floor, as Entreri stood and brushed himself off. "Without sight or hearing, how did you know he was there?"

Entreri looked over at the dead man. He had pulled out the top drawer of the dresser as he'd slumped to the floor, its contents spilled about him.

"I told him I had hit him with the needle from the window," the assassin explained. "I guessed that one of those bottles contained the antidote. He wanted to use the cover of the darkness and the silence to take care of that little detail."

“Well done!” said Jarlaxle. “I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

Entreri shook his head. “He wasn’t lying about the sword,” he said. “It held an affinity to him. I felt it clearly, for it even tried to turn against me.”

“A Netherese blade….” Jarlaxle mused. He looked at Entreri, and his eyes widened for just a moment, then a smile spread across his face. “Tell me, how does your sword feel about you now?”

Entreri shrugged, and gingerly drew the blade. He felt a definite closeness to it, more so than ever before. He turned his puzzled expression upon Jarlaxle.

“Perhaps it thinks of you as more akin to its original makers now,” the drow explained. When Entreri gave him an even more confused look, he added, looking at the fallen enemy, “He was no ordinary man.”

“So I guessed.”

“He was a shade—a creature infused with the stuff of shadow.”

Entreri shrugged, for that meant nothing to him.

“And you killed him with your vampiric dagger, yes?”

Entreri shrugged again, starting to get worried, but Jarlaxle merely laughed and produced a small mirror. Looking into it, Entreri could see, even in the dim light, that his normally brown skin had taken on a bit of a gray pallor—nothing too noticeable.

“You have infused yourself with a bit of that essence,” said the drow.

“And what does that mean?” the alarmed assassin asked.

“It means you’ve just become even better at your craft, my friend,” Jarlaxle said with a laugh. “We will learn in time just how much.”

Entreri had to be satisfied with that, he supposed, because there seemed nothing further coming from his oft-cryptic friend. He bent over and picked up the discarded idol. This time it remained silent.

“We should go and collect our money from the innkeeper,” he said.

“And?” the drow asked.

“And kill the dolt for setting us up.”

“That might not go over well with the Heliogabalus authorities,” Jarlaxle reasoned.

Entreri’s answer was one so typical that Jarlaxle silently mouthed the words along with him.

“Then we won’t tell anybody.”

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WICKLESS IN THE NETHER

If "That Curious Sword" served to advance the storylines of Entreri and Jarlaxle, and bring them into the bigger events coming to the Forgotten Realms, "Wickless in the Nether" was far more concerned with the personal relationship between the pair. I have to say, I have rarely had as much simple fun with my writing as I did with this particular story!

The story operates on many levels through the antagonists, the dragon sisters Tazmikella and Ilnezhara. Partly, it is a tribute to the Romantic poets and their appreciation of the so-called "solitary highland lass." Up to the point of Wordsworth and Shelley and the others, almost all literature focused on the "important" people, and so Tazmikella's explanation of her sister's lack of appreciation for the "peasants" is heartfelt. And thus, the dragon sisters mirror Entreri and Jarlaxle to some degree: one exotic and an emotional risk-taker, the other far more mundane and grounded, and, perhaps, limited.

That is the crux of this story, and of Idalia's flute, which would come to play a role as I continued the tale of Artemis Entreri. Jarlaxle is widening Entreri's horizons, both in showing him new parts of the Realms and in helping him to find new inspiration in his own life. Whether it is thrusting him forward as the King of Vaasa in *Promise of the Witch King*, or even hinting at a sexual relationship with, of all things, a dragon, Jarlaxle is determined to live life to the fullest and to drag Entreri along, kicking and screaming (or grumbling and promising retaliation) every inch of the way. At one

point, Entreri laments that Jarlaxle is always putting him in front of dragons, and dragons are, therefore, simply the metaphor for the wider world Jarlaxle has invited Entreri to discover.

This all goes back to Drizzt's comments in an essay in *Servant of the Shard*, when he considers this odd couple, Entreri and Jarlaxle. He understands the effect Jarlaxle might have on the man, though surely he is uncertain of the outcome, when he ponders: "Perhaps with Jarlaxle's help, Artemis Entreri will find his way out of his current empty existence. Or perhaps Jarlaxle will eventually kill him. Either way, the world will be a better place, I think."

I am constantly amazed at how the pieces of these multi-decade tales continue to fall into place—amazed because I feel as if I'm walking the road beside these characters and not simply laying out the next landscape for them to cross. Yet it all follows, logically, each tale building on the previous, and somehow these characters, both the Companions of the Hall and the duo of "villains" portrayed herein, continue to feel consistent, their roads logical, and yet they continue to surprise me. They are real to me, though whether that is symbolic of the magic of writing or a sign of my own insanity, I haven't yet decided. Either way, it's a lot of fun.

As a side note: One of the thoughts when I agreed to write these short stories was that they would appear in their respective anthologies and then be reprinted at the beginning of the next novel dealing with the characters. I didn't want to simply write side tales that had no bearing on the journey of these two characters. For reasons beyond my control, that didn't happen, and I remain sorry about that. For when I go back now and reread them, particularly this one and "That Curious Sword," I feel that the events of the Sellswords Trilogy are brought into a much tighter focus.





The Year of the Banner (1368 DR)

For a long time and across many storefronts and kiosks, he could not be seen because he did not want to be seen. For Artemis Entreri, with so many years of living in the shadows, it was as easy as that. He moved along Wall Way, a solitary figure perusing the mercantile district of the Damarran Capital of Heliogabalus on a stormy night. Torrential rains sent small rivers running along the sides of the cobblestoned street, named because of its proximity to Heliogabalus's towering outer wall.

A flash of lightning revealed the figure as he stood in front of one of the two opposing collector's shops set on the road loop known as Wall's Around. He was wrapped in a slick black cloak, shining with wetness. He had the drape pulled over both his shoulders in the inclement weather, but it was back on his right side enough to show the jeweled hilt of his signature dagger. He wore a flat-topped hat with a tight round brim, quite extraordinary in a land of simple hoods and scarves. Still, that hat paled in comparison to the one worn by the slender figure that drifted past him in the next flash of lightning, a great floppy, wide-brimmed affair, with one side pinned up and a gigantic feather reaching out from it.

"As we thought," the figure whispered as he passed by, neither of them making any movement that would indicate to even a careful observer that they were conversing. "Third on the right."

The slender figure continued on his way, his fine boots clicking loudly on the wet cobblestones.

A moment later, Entreri moved to the doorway of the collector's shop, Tazmikella's Bag of Silver, and with a look around, slipped inside.

A young couple sat behind one table, giggling and hardly taking notice of him. Across from them, a middle-aged man fidgeted with some small statues, dusting each and grumbling to himself as he replaced them on the shelves. He was plump and as round of face as he was of belly, which was considerable, with apple red cheeks and bright lips. Though his eyes were large, he seemed to be constantly squinting.

"Well, good enough," he said to Entreri. "If you came in to get out of the rain, then you're a smart one, not to doubt. Look around—perhaps you'll even consider purchasing something. Now, there's a thought that few in this town seem to be having! Yes, yes, why buy anything when one can just walk into the shop and ogle it?"

Entreri stared at him, but did not respond, either with words or any expression.

"As you will, then," the man went on. "Just do please keep your wetness from the new carpets. Someone might want to actually buy one, after all."

Hardly paying the little man any more heed, Entreri moved to the right, as he'd been instructed, to the third candlestick set in the shop's front window. Its base was in the shape of a squatting toad—a most unattractive piece, Entreri thought, though he rarely took the time to consider beauty. He picked up the fourth candlestick first, feigned a quick look over it, then set it down and took the second, then the third. The assassin slid one sensitive finger beneath the base of the candlestick. He felt the variation in texture almost immediately, from silver to wax.

A flash of lightning outside sent his thoughts back to the tavern and the napkin the serving wench had put down on the table. He recalled the verse on that old, dirty rag, and felt the wax again.

"Wickless in the nether," he whispered.

"What's that?" asked the little man.

"I said that I do enjoy the feel of this piece," Entreri lied. "The storm has ruined my candles. I came only to replace them, but now I find this most interesting candlestick."

"You want to buy that?" asked the merchant, his tone showing that actual sales really weren't a common event.

“Fifty silver pieces?” Entreri asked.

The little man scoffed at him and said, “Its weight alone would take twice that melted down.”

“It is pure silver?” Entreri asked, feigning surprise, for of course, he already knew that it was and had already estimated its worth to within a few coppers.

“Nothing but the best,” said the little round man as he hopped over. “Fifty gold would be closer to the price than fifty silver.”

Entreri moved to replace the candlestick, but stopped just before it went down on the window sill. He stood holding it for a few long moments.

“I will offer thirty gold,” he said. “A fair price.”

“Fair?” said the shopkeeper. “Why, it cost us forty just to acquire it!”

“Forty, then.”

“Forty-two,” insisted the little man.

Entreri shrugged and pulled a pouch from his belt. He tossed it up and down in his open palm for a moment or two, then tipped it over and spilled out a few coins. Another toss to test the weight, and he flipped it to the little man.

“Forty-two,” he agreed. “Perhaps even forty-three.”

Tucking the extra gold into another pouch, the assassin took the candlestick and moved for the door.

“Wait,” said the little man. “Is there anything else I might interest you in? You haven’t even purchased a candle, I mean, and the night is dark. And did you not come for candles? How fine that candlestick shapes the shadows when a proper light is placed atop it.”

Giggling at another table made the little man realize that he was speaking to himself, however, for Entreri was already gone.

Outside, another lightning flash illuminated the street, so bright and prolonged that Entreri could read the sign on the collector’s shop opposite: Ilnezhara’s Gold Coins.

With a glance each way, Entreri moved off, his boots not making a sound on the wet cobblestones. He had a long way to walk, all the way to the southern section of the city, but he moved swiftly with

little foot traffic to hinder him. He arrived at the unremarkable building a short while later and looked around, as had been his habit for many years, before moving up the back staircase to the second floor and the door to his apartment. Another look confirmed that he was alone, and he slipped through.

The room was warm and inviting, with a fire blazing in the hearth and candles burning in the many arms of the decorated candelabra that seemed everywhere. Entreri shrugged off his cloak as he entered and flipped it onto the rack by the door where a similar fine traveling cloak hung, drying. His hat went up next, taking its place before its more sizeable companion.

Entreri wiped the remaining moisture from his face with one arm, while he unfastened his belt with his other hand. He stopped short, though, and pulled out his jeweled dagger, launching it into an end-over-end flight across the room. It crossed over his small bed and dived into a silhouette he had painted on the wall—a representation of a lithe figure with a ridiculously large hat. As always, the dagger struck true, just a few inches above the bed and right in the groin area of the silhouette.

"Ouch, I suppose," Jarlaxle said.

"At least," said Entreri.

When he looked at his partner, Entreri nearly stepped back in surprise, for Jarlaxle had his eye patch up on his forehead, showing Entreri both his eyes at once for the very first time.

"I do find it rather unsettling," said the drow, "that you would wish something from that region protruding over your bed."

"If I awakened under threat and reached for my dagger, and it was anything other than that hanging over my bed, rest assured I would tear it out."

"Ouch again, I suppose."

"At least."

Jarlaxle laughed at him and asked, "Why the foul mood, my friend?"

"Personality trait."

"We deciphered the verse correctly, obviously," said Jarlaxle, motioning for the candlestick Entreri held. " 'Wickless in the nether,'

indeed."

Entreri walked toward him, but stopped short and placed the candlestick on the table as he went by.

"And all this time, I thought that remark aimed at your virility," Entreri said as he moved past and fell onto his bed.

"The tavern wench placed the napkin on the table equidistant to us both," Jarlaxle reminded. He produced the dirty old cloth from a pocket and held it up before Entreri. " 'More valuable in practical, a better bargain found,' " he read. " 'A careful eye will find the prize in sight of Wall's Around. For pretty things that serve no use, the true art finds its tether. To those who know, illumination comes wickless in the nether.' "

With a sly grin as he finished, the drow mercenary inverted the candlestick and picked at the wax set in its base, in the arse of the squatting toad.

"The second line was key, of course," he said as he popped the plug free. "Silver is more practical than gold, and so our choice of shops was settled." Jarlaxle's smile widened as he dipped his delicate little finger into the cavity and pressed his nail against the side, pulling forth a thin rolled parchment as he retracted the finger. "Our correct choice."

The drow mercenary leaned forward over the table and spread the parchment before him.

"Interesting," he said, and when no response came forth from his roommate, he said it again, and again.

After many frustrating minutes, Jarlaxle said it yet again, then nearly jumped out of his seat when he was answered by Entreri, who was standing right behind him.

"It's a map."

"A map?" the drow asked. "It is a series of dots, a circle, a single line, and a drop of blood. How is that a map?"

"The dots are buildings … locations. All the buildings that have played a part in this riddle we have entered," Entreri explained. He leaned forward, indicating each as he named them. "The tavern, our apartment …"

He paused there and glanced around, not pleased to learn that whomever was behind it all knew where they lived.

“And the Wall Around,” said Jarlaxle, catching on and pointing to the circle. “Bag of Silver and Gold Coins. Indeed, the proportions of the distances seem fairly accurate.” He measured each with his fingers as he spoke, confirming his guess. “But all of this was known to us already.”

“Except for that,” said Entreri, pointing to the one mark on the far edge of the long parchment, a drop of blood very far removed from the other indicators.

“Blood?” asked the drow.

“A destination.”

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The pair found the spot of blood—a rather unremarkable cabin on the side of a rocky hill far outside the wall of Heliogabalus—in the light drizzle of the following morning. The city was not visible from the cabin, for it was on the far side of the hill, nor was it near any roads.

Entreri eyed the abode suspiciously, scanning the surroundings for signs of ambush, but no threat presented itself. The roof was not high—the back side of the house, abutting the hill, rose no more than five feet above the stony ground—and there were no trees close enough to afford any archers an easy shot.

So caught up was the wary assassin in scouting the surrounding area that he was caught somewhat by surprise when a woman’s voice addressed the pair right from the small porch of the house.

“Clever and quick,” she said. “Better than I expected, really.”

The companions took a step away from each other, each sizing up the woman from a different angle. She was not unattractive, though certainly not beautiful. Her face was rather plain, and unadorned with the many powders and colors that had become all the rage in Damara among the women of the court. That face seemed a bit short, too, or perhaps that was because her shoulders seemed too wide for the rest of her frame. She appeared a little older than Entreri, probably nearing, if not already past, her fiftieth birthday.

Her thin, shoulder length hair was a soft blend of gray and strawberry blond, though certainly not as lustrous as it once might have appeared.

She wore a modest dress, powder blue and simply tailored. Her shoes were low cut, quite impractical for the muddy, harsh terrain between the cabin and the city. They were shoes more common within the city gates, Entreri noted, and certainly nothing a hearty hermit so far out of town would wear.

Entreri felt Jarlaxle's gaze upon him, so he turned to take in his friend's smirk.

"Greetings, Lady Tazmikella," the drow said with a great flourish and a deep bow, sweeping his wide brimmed hat off as he bent low.

Entreri, surprised by the remark, looked to the woman, noting her sudden scowl.

"Do you always take such presumptive chances?" she asked, and Entreri couldn't tell if she was annoyed because Jarlaxle had guessed correctly, or insulted because he had so labeled her.

"Deductive reasoning," explained the drow.

The woman didn't seem very impressed, or convinced, when she said, "I have your interest, it would seem, so come inside."

She turned and walked into the cabin, and with another shared look and a pair of concerned shrugs, they moved up side by side, Jarlaxle's enchanted boots clicking loudly even on the soft ground, and Entreri's skilled steps making not a whisper of sound, even on the hard wood of the porch stairs.

Inside, they found the façade of the cabin wholly misleading, for the room was spacious—too much so, it seemed—and well-adorned with fabulous tapestries and rugs. Most were stitched with designs depicting the gentler pleasures of life in Damara: a shepherd with his flock on a sunny hillside, a woman singing while cleaning laundry at a stream, a group of children playing at the joust with long poles and the pennants of well-known heroes.… Candelabra and fine, sturdy plates covered the table. Dry sinks lined every wall, full of plants and flowers neatly and tastefully arranged. A chandelier hung over the center table, a simple but beautiful many-

limbed piece that would have been more fitting in one of the mansions of the great city, though not in its more formal rooms.

Looking around at the decor, at the distinctive silver flavor, Entreri realized that Jarlaxle's guess had been correct.

"Please, sit," the woman said.

She motioned to the simple but elegant carved wooden chairs around the central table. It was hardly inexpensive furniture, Entreri noted, as he felt the weight of the chair and let his finger play in the deep grooves of superior craftsmanship.

"You have moved quickly and so you are deserving of similar effort on my part," the woman said.

"You have heard of us and wish to hire us," said Jarlaxle.

"Of course."

"You do not look like one who would wish another killed."

The woman blanched at the drow's suggestion, Entreri noted. For that was Entreri's role whenever they met a new prospective employer and Jarlaxle posed that very same question. Jarlaxle always liked to start such interviews in a blunt manner.

"I was told that you two were skilled in … procurement."

"You seem to do well in that area yourself, Lady Taz …" Jarlaxle stopped short, looking for cues.

"Tazmikella," she confirmed. "And yes, I do, and thank you for noticing. But you may have also noticed that I am not alone in my endeavors in the fine city of Heliogabalus."

"Ilnezhara's Gold Coins," said Entreri.

"It is a name I cannot speak without an accompanying curse," the woman admitted. "My rival, once my friend. And alas, she has done it again."

"It?" the two asked together.

"Procured a piece for which she is not worthy," said Tazmikella, and when doubting expressions came at her, she sat back in her chair and held up her hands to stop any forthcoming inquiries. "Allow me to explain."

The woman closed her eyes and remained silent for a long while.

"Not so long ago," she began tentatively, as if she wasn't sure if they would get her point, "I happened across a woman sitting on a

rock in a field. She did not see me, for she was wrapped in memories. At least, it seemed that way. She was singing, her eyes closed, her mind looking far away—to one she had lost, from what I could tell from the few words I could decipher. Never have I heard such passion and pain in a voice, as if every note carried her heart and soul. She touched me deeply with the beauty of her art and song.

"For me, there was simple appreciation, but my counterpart—"

"Ilnezhara," Jarlaxle reasoned, and Tazmikella nodded.

"Ilnezhara would never have understood the beauty of that woman's song. She would have cited how the words strained to rhyme, or the lack of proper technique and the occasional warbling in that untrained voice. It was just those imperfect warbles that pulled at my heart."

"Because they were honest," said Jarlaxle.

"And thus practical," added Entreri, bringing it back to the verse that had brought them there.

"Not pretty enough for Ilnezhara, perhaps," Jarlaxle said, building upon the thought. "But the prettiness of perfection would have tethered the honesty of emotion."

"Exactly!" said Tazmikella. "Oh, this is a battle we have long waged. Over everything and anything, it seems. Over painting and sculpture, tapestries, song, and story. I have listened to bards, have watched them sweep away entire common rooms in tales of bold adventure, enrapturing all who would listen. And only to hear Ilnezhara, once my partner, tell me that the structure of the tale was all wrong because it did not follow some formula decided by scholars far removed from those folk in the tavern.

"We battled at auction recently, or we thought to, except that I held no interest in the painting presented. It was no more than a scribbling of lines that evoked nothing more than simple curiosity in me—the curiosity of how it could be proclaimed as art, you see."

"Your counterpart saw it differently?" asked the drow.

"Not at first, perhaps, but when the artist explained the inner meaning, Ilnezhara's eyes glowed. Never mind that no such meaning could be elicited through viewing the work itself. That did not

matter. The piece followed the prescribed form, and so the conclusions of the artist seemed self-evident, after they were fully explained. That is the way with people like her, you see. They exist within their critical sphere of all that is culture, not to appreciate the warble in a wounded woman's song, but to stratify all that is around them, to tighten the limits of that which meets approval and dismiss all that is accessible to the common man."

"They make themselves feel better," Jarlaxle explained to Entreri, who realized that he was either bored or lost.

"So, you would have us steal this painting that you did not want in the first place?" Entreri asked.

Tazmikella scoffed at the notion.

"Hardly! Cut it with your fine sword for all I care. No, there is another piece, a piece Ilnezhara came upon purely by accident, and one which she will never even try to appreciate. No, she keeps it only because she knows it would be precious to me!"

The mercenaries looked at each other.

"A flute," Tazmikella said. "A flute carved of a single piece of gray, dry driftwood. It was fashioned long ago by a wandering monk—Idalia of the Yellow Rose was his name. He took this single piece of ugly, castoff driftwood and worked it with impeccable care, day after day. It became the focus of his very existence. He nearly died of starvation as he tried to complete his wonderful flute. And complete it he did. Oh, and from it came the most beautiful music, notes as clear as the wind through ravines of unspoiled stone."

"And your counterpart got it from this monk?"

"Idalia has been dead for centuries," Tazmikella explained. "And the flute thought lost. But somehow, she found it."

"Could you not just buy it from her?" asked the drow.

"It is not for sale."

"But you said she would not appreciate it."

Again the woman scoffed and said, "She sets it aside, sets it away without a thought to it. It is valuable to her only because of the pain she knows I endure in not having it."

The two mercenaries looked at each other again.

“And not just because I do not have it,” Tazmikella went on, somewhat frantically, it seemed. “She knows the pain that I and others of my humor feel because no breath will flow through the work of Idalia. Don’t you see? She is reveling in her ability to steal true beauty from the common man.”

“I do not—” Entreri began, but Jarlaxle cut him off.

“It is a travesty,” the drow said. “One that you wish us to correct.”

Tazmikella rose from the table and moved to a drawer in one of the dry sinks, returning a moment later with a small parchment in hand.

“Ilnezhara plans a showing at her place of business,” she explained, handing the notice to Jarlaxle.

“The flute is not there,” Entreri wondered aloud.

“It is at her personal abode, a singular tower northeast of the city.”

“So while Ilnezhara is at her showing, you would have us visit her home?” Jarlaxle asked.

“Or you, you alone, could go to the showing,” Tazmikella explained, indicating the drow. “Ilnezhara will find one of your … beauty, quite interesting. It should not be difficult for you to elicit an invitation to her private home.”

Jarlaxle looked at her skeptically.

“Easier than breaking into her tower,” Tazmikella explained. “She is a woman of no small means, rich enough, as am I, to buy the finest of pieces, to hire the most skilled of guards, and to create the most deadly of constructs.”

“Promising,” Entreri noted, but though he was being sarcastic with his tone, his eyes glowed at the presented challenge.

“Get that flute,” Tazmikella said, turning to face Entreri directly, “and I will reward you beyond your grandest dreams. A hundred bags of silver, perhaps?”

“And if I prefer gold?”

As soon as the words left his mouth and Tazmikella’s face went tight with a fierce scowl, the assassin figured he might have crossed over the line. He offered a quick apology in the form of a tip of his hat, then looked at Jarlaxle and nodded his agreement.

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Artemis Entreri never could resist a challenge. He was supposed to hide outside the singular stone tower and await Jarlaxle's appearance beside Ilnezhara, if the drow mercenary could manage an invitation there, as Tazmikella had hinted.

The front of the thirty-foot gray stone tower had a wide awning of polished stone, supported by four delicate white columns, two carved with the likenesses of athletic men, and two with shapely women. The tower door beneath that awning was of heavy wood, carved in its center to resemble a blooming flower—a rose, the assassin thought.

Both the pull ring and the lock were gilded, and Entreri couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between that place and the modest house of Tazmikella.

Entreri knew that the door would be locked and probably set with devilish traps, perhaps even magical wards. He saw no guards around, however, and so he moved under cover of the waning daylight to the side of the tower, then inched his way around. At one point, he noticed the sill of a narrow window about halfway up, and his fingers instinctively felt at the stone blocks. He knew he could climb up, and easily.

Realizing that, he went instead for the door.

In short order, Entreri found a trap: a pressure plate in front of the handle. Following the logical line to the front left column, he easily disarmed that one. Then he discovered a second: a spring needle set within the lock's tumblers. He took a block of wood from his pouch, an item he had designed precisely for that type of trap. The center was cut out, just enough to allow him to slide his lock pick through with a bit of play room. He slipped it in, wriggled it a few times, then nodded his satisfaction as he heard the expected thump against the block of wood. Retracting the block, he saw the dart, and saw that it was shiny with poison. Ilnezhara played seriously.

And so Entreri played seriously for the next few moments too, scouring every inch of that door, then rechecking. Satisfied that he

had removed all of the mechanical traps, at least (for magical ones were much harder to detect), he went to work on the lock.

The door clicked open.

Entreri leaped back, rushing to the column to reset the pressure plate. He moved fast and sprang to the threshold, moving through suddenly and pushing the door closed behind him, thinking to relock it.

But as he bent with his lock picks to reset the tumblers, the door burst in, forcing him to dive aside.

"Oh, for the love of drow," he cursed, continuing his roll off to the side as the carvings from the columns strode through, slender stone swords in hand.

Out came Charon's Claw, Entreri's deadly sword, his jeweled dagger appearing in his other hand. With little regard for those formidable weapons, the two closest of the stone constructs charged in, side by side. Charon's Claw went out to meet that charge, Entreri snapping the sword left and right to force an opening. He shifted sidelong and rushed ahead, between the stone swords, between the statues, and he managed to snap off a quick slash at one with his sword, and stabbed hard at the other. Both blades bit, and for any mortal creature, either might have proved a fatal strike. But the constructs had no life energy for Entreri's vampiric dagger to siphon, and no soul for Charon's Claw to melt.

They were not his preferred opponents, Entreri knew, and he lamented that no one seemed to hire flesh and blood guards anymore.

He didn't dwell on it, though, and pressed past the two male statues.

The two females came at Entreri fast and hard, leaping at him and clawing the air with stony fingers.

Entreri hit the floor in a sidelong roll. He got kicked by both, but accepted the heavy hits so that he could send both tumbling forward, off balance, to smash into their male counterparts. Stone crumbled and dust flew in the heavy collision, and Entreri was fast to his feet, wading in from behind and bashing hard with his powerful sword.

As the statues unwound and turned on him in force, Entreri called upon another of Charon's Claw's tricks, waving the blade in a wide arc and summoning forth a black wall of ash as he did. Behind that optical barrier, the assassin went out to the side, then reversed and charged right back in as the lead statues crashed through the opaque screen.

Again his sword went to work ferociously, chopping at the stone. And again, Entreri waved a wall of clouding ash and rushed away.

In the temporary reprieve, he noted that two of the statues were down and crumbled, and a third, one of the women, was hopping toward him on one leg, its other lying on the floor. Beside it came one of the males, seemingly unscathed.

Entreri rushed ahead to meet that charge before the male could get far out in front of the crippled female. In came the stone sword, and Entreri hooked it expertly with his dagger and turned it out, then jerked it back in as he went out, slipping past the male and going low, then cutting across with his sword, taking the remaining leg from the hopping female. She crashed down hard and Entreri came up fast, planting his foot on her face and springing away just in front of a mighty downward chop from the male's sword.

A downward chop that split the female's head in half.

Entreri hit the ground in a spin and came right back in, one against one. He slipped Charon's Claw inside the blade of the thrusting stone sword, then lifted as he turned to drive the weapon and weapon arm up high. He stepped forward and jabbed his dagger hard into the armpit of the statue, then disengaged Charon's Claw at such an angle that he was able to crack it down across the statue's face as he moved off to the side. The statue turned to pursue, but Entreri was already reversing his direction, moving with perfect balance and sudden speed.

He hit the statue across the face again as he passed, but that was merely the feint, for as the statue threw its sword arm up to block, Entreri turned and rushed under that arm, coming out the other way in perfect balance and position to slam Charon's Claw against the upper arm of the already-damaged sword arm.

That arm fell to the floor.

The statue came on, clawing at him with its one hand. Entreri's blades worked in a blur, expertly taking the fingers from the statue's hand one at a time.

Then he whittled the hand to a stump in short order. The statue tried to head butt him, but its head fell to the floor.

"Stubborn rock," Entreri remarked, and he lifted his foot up, braced it against the torso, and shoved the lifeless thing away and to the floor.

His weapons went away in the flash of an eye, and he turned to regard the room, taking in the sight of treasure after treasure.

"I'm working for the wrong person," he mumbled, awestricken.

He shrugged and began his search for the driftwood flute of Idalia. Before long, he realized that the destroyed statues were deconstructing, their essence and materials drifting back out the open door to the columns—as he'd expected they would.

When they were finally back in place outside on the columns, magically repairing as if nothing had happened, Entreri closed and locked the door. Anyone approaching would think all was as it had been, or so he hoped.

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As soon as the couple walked through the tower door and he got a good look at the infamous Ilnezhara, Entreri wondered if there might not be more to Tazmikella's antipathy toward her former friend than simple merchant rivalry. For Ilnezhara seemed everything that Tazmikella was not. Her hair hung long and lustrous, and so rich in hue that Entreri couldn't decide if it was reddish-blond or reddish-brown, or even copper colored, perhaps. Her eyes were blue and big—enormous, actually, but they did not unbalance her bright face. Though her nose was thin and straight, and her cheekbones high and pronounced, her lips were as thick and delicious as any Entreri had ever seen. She was taller than the five-and-a-half-foot Jarlaxle by several inches, and moved her slender form with as much grace as the nimble drow.

"I do find you entertaining," she said to the drow, and she tossed her thick hair.

Entreri knew that he was well hidden, tucked in a cranny partly covered by a tapestry and concealed by a many-armed rack holding bowls of many colors. There was no way that Ilnezhara could see him, but when she tossed her hair and her face flashed his way, he felt the intensity of her gaze upon him.

She went right back to her conversation with Jarlaxle, and Entreri silently scolded himself. When had he ever so questioned his abilities? Had he been taken in by the woman's beauty? He shook the thought away and concentrated on the conversation playing out before him. The couple were seated on a divan then, with Ilnezhara curled up beside the charming drow, her finger delicately tracing circles on his chest, for she had opened the top two buttons of his fine white shirt. She was speaking of entertainment, still.

"It is my way," Jarlaxle replied. "I have traveled so many of the surface lands, from tavern to tavern and palace to palace, entertaining peasants and kings alike. I find my charms my only defense against the inevitable impressions offered by my black skin."

"With song? Will you sing to me, Jarlaxle?"

"Song, yes, but my talents are more musical."

"With instruments? I have a fine collection, of course."

She pulled herself from the divan and began striding toward the back of the room. There were indeed many instruments back there, Entreri knew, for of course he had searched much of the tower already. Several lutes and a magnificent harp, all of exceeding quality and workmanship, graced the back area of this first floor.

"Your wonderful fingers must trace delicate sounds about the strings of a lute," Ilnezhara said—rather lewdly, Entreri thought—as she lifted a lute from a soft case to show to Jarlaxle.

"In truth, it is my kiss," said the drow. Entreri tried not to let his disgusted sigh be heard. "My breath. I favor the flute above all."

"The flute?" echoed Ilnezhara. "Why, indeed, I have one of amazing timbre, though it is not much to view."

Jarlaxle leaned toward her. Entreri held his breath, not even realizing that it all seemed too easy.

Ilnezhara continued toward the back of the room.

“Would you like to see it?” she asked coyly. “Or rather, would you like to see where I keep it?”

Jarlaxle’s smile melted into a look of confusion.

“Or are you hoping, perhaps, that your sneaky friend has already found it, and so when I open its case, it will not be there?” the woman went on.

“My lady …”

“He is still here. Why do you not ask him?” Ilnezhara stated, and she turned her gaze over to the cranny at the side, staring directly at the hidden Entreri.

“Play with my friends!” Ilnezhara cried suddenly, and she lifted her hand and waved it in a circle. Immediately, several statuettes—a pair of gargoyles, a lizard, and a bear—began to grow and twist.

“Not more constructs!” Entreri growled, bursting from his concealing cubby.

Jarlaxle sprang from the divan, but Ilnezhara moved with equal speed, slipping behind a screen and running off.

“Well done,” Jarlaxle said to Entreri, the two taking up the chase.

Entreri thought to argue that he had defeated every entry-way trap, and that he could not have expected Ilnezhara to be so prepared, but he stayed silent, having no real answer to the sarcasm.

Behind the screen, they found a corridor between the racks of artwork and jewelry cases. Up ahead, the woman’s form slipped behind yet another delicate, painted screen, and as it was very near to the curving back wall, it seemed as if they had her—and would get to her before the constructs fully animated and caught up to them.

“You have nowhere to run!” Jarlaxle called, but even as he spoke, he and Entreri saw the wall above the screen crack open, a secret door swinging in.

“You didn’t find that?” the drow asked.

“I had but a few minutes,” Entreri argued, and he went left around the screen as Jarlaxle went right.

Entreri hit the door first, shouldering it in and fully expecting that he would find himself out the back side of the tower. As he pushed through, though, he felt that there was nothing beneath his foot. He

grabbed hard at the door, finding a pull ring, and held on, hanging in mid air as it continued to swing. As he came around and took in the scene before him, he nearly dropped, as his jaw surely did.

For he was not outside, but in a vast magically-lighted chamber, an extra-dimensional space, it had to be, going on and on beyond Entreri's sight. Having served among the wealthiest merchants in Calimport, and with the richest pashas, Artemis Entreri was no stranger to treasure hoards. But never before in all his life had he imagined a collection of coins, jewels, and artifacts to rival this! Mounds of gold taller than he lay scattered about the floor, glittering with thousands of jewels sitting on their shining sides. Swords and armor, statues and instruments, bowls and amazing furniture pieces were everywhere, every item showing wonderful craftsmanship and care in design.

Entreri glanced back to see Jarlaxle at the threshold, staring in and appearing equally dumbfounded.

"An illusion," Entreri said.

Jarlaxle shifted his eye patch from one eye to the other and peered intently into the room.

"No, it's not," the drow said, and he glanced back to the tower's entry room.

With a shrug, Jarlaxle casually stepped into the room, dropping the eight feet or so to the floor. Hearing the clatter of the approaching constructs behind him, Entreri let go of the door, swinging it closed as he dropped. It shut with a resounding thud, and the tumult disappeared.

"It is wonderful, yes?" Ilnezhara asked, stepping out from behind a pile of gold.

"By the gods …" whispered Entreri, and he glanced at his partner.

"I have heard of such treasures, good lady," the drow said. "But always in the care of—"

"Don't even say it," whispered Entreri, but it didn't matter anyway, for Ilnezhara's features began to shift and scrunch suddenly, accompanied by the sound of cracking bones.

A huge copper-colored tail sprang out behind her, and gigantic wings sprouted from her shoulders.

“A dragon,” Entreri remarked. “Another stinking dragon. What game is this with you?” he asked his partner. “You keep placing me in front of stinking dragons! In all my life, I had never even seen a wyrm, and now, beside you, I have come to know them far too well.”

“You took me to the first one,” Jarlaxle reminded.

“To get rid of that cursed artifact, yes!” Entreri countered. “You remember, of course. The artifact that had you under a destructive spell? Would I have chosen to go to the lair of a dragon, else?”

“It does not matter,” Jarlaxle argued.

“Of course it matters,” Entreri spat back. “You keep taking me to stinking dragons.”

Ilnezhara’s “ahem” shook the ground beneath their feet and drew them from their private argument.

“I could do without the disparaging adjectives, thank you very much,” she said to them when she had their attention, her voice sounding very similar to what it had been when she had appeared as a human woman, except that it was multiplied in volume many times over.

“I suspect we need not worry about the constructs coming in to attack us,” said Jarlaxle.

The dragon smiled, rows of teeth as long as Entreri’s arm gleaming in the magical light.

“You do entertain me, pretty drow,” she said. “Though I lament that you are not as wise as I had believed. To try to steal from a dragon at the behest of a fool like Tazmikella? For it was she who sent you, of course. The foolish woman can never understand why I always seem to best her.”

“Go,” Jarlaxle whispered, and the assassin broke left, while the drow broke right.

But the dragon moved, too, breathing forth.

Entreri cried out and dived into a roll, not knowing what to expect. He felt the wind of dragon breath passing over him, but came back to his feet, apparently unhurt. His elation at that lasted only a moment, though, until he realized that he was moving much more slowly.

“You cannot win, of course, nor is there any escape,” said Ilnezhara. “Tell me, pretty drow, would you have come here to steal from me if you had known of my true identity?”

Entreri looked past the dragon to see Jarlaxle simply standing there, vulnerable, before the great wyrm. His incredulous expression was all the answer Ilnezhara needed.

“I thought not,” she said. “You admit defeat, then?”

Jarlaxle just shrugged and held his arms out to the sides.

“Good, good,” said the dragon.

Her bones began to crunch again, and soon she appeared in her human form.

“I did not know that copper dragons were so adept at shape-changing,” the drow said, finding his voice.

“I spent many years studying under an archmage,” Ilnezhara replied. “The passage of centuries can be quite boring, you understand.”

“I do, yes,” the drow answered. “Though my friend …”

He swept his arm out toward Entreri.

“Your friend who still thinks he might get behind me and stab me with his puny dagger, or cut off my head with his mighty sword? Indeed, that is a formidable weapon,” she said to Entreri. “Would you try it against Ilnezhara?”

The assassin glared at her, but did not answer.

“Or perhaps you would give it to me, in exchange for your lives?”

“Yes, he would,” Jarlaxle was quick to answer.

Entreri turned his scowl on his friend, but realized that he really couldn’t argue the point.

“Or perhaps,” said Ilnezhara, “you would instead agree to perform a service for me. Yes, you seem uniquely qualified for this.”

“You need something stolen from Tazmikella,” Entreri reasoned.

Ilnezhara scoffed at the notion and said, “What could she have that would begin to interest me? No, of course not. Kill her.”

“Kill her?” Jarlaxle echoed.

“Yes, I grow weary of our façade of a friendship, or friendly rivalry, and I grow impatient. I do not wish to wait the few decades until old age takes her or renders her too infirm to continue her silly

games. Kill her and arouse no suspicion from the authorities. If you can do that, then perhaps I will forgive your transgression."

"Perhaps?" asked the drow.

"Perhaps," answered the dragon, and when the two thieves hesitated, she added, "Do you believe that you can find a better deal?"



Entreri watched Tazmikella stiffen when she noticed Jarlaxle sitting casually in a chair in the back of her modest cabin.

"You have the flute of Idalia?" she asked, breathless.

"Hardly," the drow replied. "It would seem that you did not fully inform us regarding the disposition of your rival."

From his hiding spot off to the side, Entreri measured Tazmikella's reaction. He and Jarlaxle had agreed that if the woman knew Ilnezhara's true form, then they would indeed kill her, and without remorse.

"I told you she would be well protected," Tazmikella started to say, and she stiffened again as a dagger came against her back.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "I hired you honestl—" She paused. "She sent you back here to kill me, didn't she? She offered you gold against my silver."

Entreri hardly heard her question. He hadn't even pricked her with his vicious, life-drawing dagger, and yet the enchanted blade had sent such a surge of energy up his arm that the hairs were standing on end. Trembling, confused, the assassin lifted his free hand, placed it against Tazmikella's shoulder, and gave a push.

He might as well have tried to push a mountain.

Entreri groaned and retracted both open hand and dagger.

"For the love of an eight-legged demon queen," he muttered as he walked off to the side, shaking his head in disgust.

He glanced over at Jarlaxle, who was staring at him curiously.

"Her?" the drow asked.

Entreri nodded.

Tazmikella sighed and said, "My own sister sent you to kill me…."

"Your sister?" asked the drow.

“One dragon’s not good enough for you, is it?” Entreri growled at his partner. “Now you’ve put me in the middle of a feud between two!”

“All that you had to do was steal a simple flute,” Tazmikella reminded them.

“From a dragon,” said Entreri.

“I thought you quick and clever.”

“Better if we had known the power of our enemy.”

“And now you have come to kill me,” said Tazmikella. “Oh, is there no room for loyalty anymore?”

“We weren’t going to kill you, actually,” said Jarlaxle.

“You would say that now.”

“If we found out that you knew you were sending us into the home of a dragon, then yes, we might have killed you,” Entreri added.

“You’ll note that my friend did not drive the blade into your back,” said the drow. “We came to talk, not murder.”

“So, now that you are aware of my … disposition, you wish to parley? Perhaps I can persuade you to go and kill Ilnezhara.”

“My good … lady,” the drow said, and he dipped a polite bow. “We prefer not to involve ourselves in such feuds. We are thieves—freely admitted!—but not killers.”

“I can think of a drow I wouldn’t mind killing right now,” said Entreri, and he took some hope, at least, in noticing that Tazmikella smirked with amusement.

“I would suggest that you and your sister sort this out reasonably. Through talk and not battle. Your king carries Dragonsbane as his surname, does he not? I would doubt that Gareth would be pleased with having his principal city leveled in the fight between a pair of great dragons.”

“Yes, dear sister,” came another voice, and Entreri groaned again.

Jarlaxle bowed even lower as Ilnezhara stepped into view, as if she had simply materialized out of nowhere.

“I told you they wouldn’t try to kill me,” Tazmikella replied.

“Only because that one discovered your true identity before he plunged his dagger home,” Ilnezhara argued.

“That is not entirely true,” said Entreri, but they weren’t listening to him.

“I suppose I could not blame them if they did try to kill me,” said Tazmikella. “They were instructed to do so by a dragon, after all.”

“Self-preservation is a powerful incentive,” her sister agreed as she moved next to Jarlaxle.

Ilnezhara reached up and unbuttoned his shirt, and again began tracing lines on his chest with her long finger.

“You wish to play with me before you kill me, then?” Jarlaxle asked her.

“Kill you?” Ilnezhara said with feigned horror. “Pretty drow, why would I ever wish such a thing as that? Oh no, I have plans for you, to be sure, but killing you isn’t in them.”

She snuggled a bit closer as she spoke, and Jarlaxle grinned, seeming very pleased.

“She’s a dragon!” Entreri said, and all three looked at him.

There usually wasn’t much emotion in Artemis Entreri’s voice, but so heavily weighted were those three words that it hit the others as profoundly as if he had rushed across the room, grabbed Jarlaxle by the collar, lifted him from the ground, and slammed him against the wall, shouting, “Are you mad?” with abandon.

“That one is so unimaginative,” Ilnezhara said to her sister.

“He is practical.”

“He is boring,” Ilnezhara corrected. She smirked at Entreri. “Tell me, human, as you walk along the muddy trail, do you not wonder what might be inside the gilded coach that passes you by?”

“You’re a dragon,” said Entreri.

Ilnezhara laughed at him.

“You have no idea what that means,” Ilnezhara promised.

She put her arm around Jarlaxle and pulled him close.

“I know that if you squeeze harder, Jarlaxle’s intestines will come out of his mouth,” Entreri said, stealing Ilnezhara’s superior smile.

“He has no imagination,” Jarlaxle assured her.

“You are such a peasant,” Ilnezhara said to Entreri. “Perhaps you should get better acquainted with my sister.”

Entreri rubbed a hand over his face, and looked at Tazmikella, who seemed quite amused by it all.

"Enough of this," Tazmikella declared. "It is settled, then."

"Is it?" Entreri asked.

"You work for us now," Ilnezhara explained. "You do show cleverness and wit, even if that one is without imagination."

"We had to learn, you must understand," added her sister.

"Are we to understand that this whole thing was designed as a test for us?" asked Jarlaxle.

"Dragons…." Entreri muttered.

"Of course," said Ilnezhara.

"Then you two do not wish to battle to the death?"

"Of course not," both sisters said together.

"We wish to increase our hoards," said Tazmikella. "That is where you come in. We have maps that need following, and rumors that need confirming. You will work for us."

"Do not doubt that we will reward you greatly," Ilnezhara purred.

She pulled Jarlaxle closer, drawing an unintentional grunt from him.

"She's a dragon," Entreri said.

"Peasant," Ilnezhara shot back. She laughed again, then pulled Jarlaxle around and released him back toward the door. "Go now back to your apartment. We will fashion some instructions for you shortly."

"Your discretion is demanded," her sister added.

"Of course," said Jarlaxle, and he bowed low again, sweeping off his feathered hat.

"Oh, and here," said Ilnezhara. She pulled out a plain-looking flute of gray driftwood. "You earned this," she said. She motioned as if to toss it to the drow, but turned and flipped it out to Entreri instead. "Learn it well, peasant—to amuse me, and also because you might find it possessed of a bit of its own magic. Perhaps you will come to better appreciate beauty you cannot yet understand."

Jarlaxle grinned and bowed again, but Entreri just tucked the flute into his belt and headed straight for the door, wanting to get far away while it was still possible. He passed by Tazmikella, thinking

to go right out into the night, but she held up her hand and stopped him as completely as if he had walked into a castle wall.

"Discretion," she reminded.

Entreri nodded and slipped aside, then went out into the foggy night, Jarlaxle right behind him.

"It worked out quite well, I think," said the drow, moving up beside him.

Jarlaxle reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder, and in the cover of that shake, the drow's other arm snaked behind his back, reaching out and gently lifting the flute from Entreri's belt.

"Dragons…." Entreri argued.

He shoved Jarlaxle's arm away, and used the cover of the movement to flash his other hand across and secretly take back the flute, even as Jarlaxle set it in his belt.

"Are you so much the peasant, as beautiful Ilnezhara claims?" asked the drow, moving back beside his partner. "Your imagination, man! Have we ever known wealthier benefactors? Or more alluring?"

"Alluring? They're dragons!"

"Yes, they are," said a smug Jarlaxle, and he seemed quite entranced with that notion.

Of course, that didn't stop him from sliding his hand across to relieve Entreri of the magical flute once more. The drow brought it farther around his back to a waiting loop on his belt—a magical loop that would tighten and resist thieving fingers.

Except that what Jarlaxle thought was the loop was really Entreri's cupped hand and the man wasted no time in bringing the flute back.

Such was the fog in the friendship of thieves.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *The Highwayman*
CDS BOOKS, 2004



THE DOWERY

The Dowery" was actually published in the first edition of my DemonWars novel, *The Highwayman*. I took a chance after I wrote this novel, publishing it in an unconventional manner with a company called CDS. Working through CDS wasn't quite "self-publishing," but they were doing an experiment where they would give the author much more control over the handling of his or her work. For example, I picked an artist (Tood Lockwood, of course!) and worked with him directly on the cover concept. I also picked my editor for the book.

The gist of CDS's model was that they would pay far less of an advance, thus minimizing their risk in publishing, but would give the author a much larger royalty percentage. Authors had more at stake, but also more creative control over the project than they would with traditional publishers.

It was an interesting idea, and many conventional publishers were wondering how it would play out. I spoke with Wizards of the Coast about a cross-promotional deal—they would let me write a Dark Elf story for the back of *The Highwayman* in exchange for advertising in the book. They, of course, would retain all the same rights to "The Dowery" as they would have had I published it in one of their anthologies.

That's the business background, but here's a little more background on why I wanted a Drizzt story in a DemonWars novel. First the obvious: Drizzt is my most popular creation and I want Drizzt readers to try out some of my other writing, particularly my

DemonWars series, which I consider to be some of my best work. DemonWars takes place in Corona, a world of my creation. It is my Forgotten Realms, my Shannara, my Middle-earth. When I plotted out how to present this world to readers, I had the idea to write two large trilogies—big books with many characters and storylines. They would serve to define the world of Corona; its magic system, the social structure, and of course the monsters. Everything came out more or less as planned, but the DemonWars series actually became seven books: two trilogies and a bridge novel that joined them together.

After building the world, my hope was to return to Corona and do more of the personal adventure tales like the Drizzt novels that I so love to write. *The Highwayman* is the first of these personal tales, and so it made sense to pair it with a Drizzt tale. "The Dowery" itself is a rollicking little Drizzt/Catti-brie adventure, a short piece that hits all the beat points of Drizzt's journey. Its tone is very similar to that of *The Highwayman*, but with more rollicking action and a bit less graphic violence. Note how many people are actually killed in this short story, even though a significant part of it is a wild battle scene.

As an addition to the Drizzt tales, "The Dowery" fills in some of the blanks of those six years between *The Halfling's Gem* and *The Legacy*. When we rejoined Drizzt and Catti-brie in *The Legacy*, we saw them with Deudermont on *Sea Sprite*, which makes sense, but the addition of a drow to the crew had to be met with some resistance, I expect.

Looking back on the story now, after the events of *The Pirate King*, it reinforces the internal consistency of the long journey I've walked with Drizzt. Even though I didn't remember this story (honestly) when I wrote *The Pirate King*, you can compare the character of Captain Deudermont in both of these tales and you will see the same strong righteous streak. And if you look deeper at Deudermont's intransigence in "The Dowery" perhaps you will even find a foreshadowing of the events in *The Pirate King* where pragmatism withered under unrelenting principle. It's strange, perhaps, but

when I read this story now, I see the dark prefiguring of Deudermont's mistake.

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"You're sure this is the building?" Drizzt Do'Urden asked his companion, and he turned from the plain, nearly windowless wooden warehouse to consider Catti-brie as he spoke. Once again, the sight of her knocked him off balance. With her thick auburn shoulder-length hair, huge blue eyes and soft features and lips, the woman was undeniably attractive—to Drizzt, she was the most beautiful woman in all the world—but now, dressed in the revealing outfit of a bowery tavern wench, practically an invitation, it seemed, the dark elf was much more afraid of what the many rakes and ruffians of the great city of Waterdeep's bowery might think of her.

"Are you sure?" he asked again.

"I have watched them for three days," she reminded. "And every time is the same?"

"Every one so far has gone into the warehouse," Catti-brie confirmed in a voice thick with dwarvish brogue. They had been out of Mithral Hall for almost two months now, riding along the wide and wild expanses to the west, past the Trollmoors and the unwelcoming city of Nesme, whose guardian riders would not suffer Drizzt, a dark elf, to walk among them. When they had left Mithral Hall, they had agreed to chase the lowering sun, and so they had, all the way to the Sword Coast and Waterdeep, the greatest city in all of Faerûn.

Drizzt was allowed in here, though hardly welcome. But here they could set up their base and await the arrival of one of the few men in all the world who would fully accept this particular drow. They had sold their horses, rented a small flat down by the docks, and learned the lay of the land, the sights, the smells and most importantly, the hierarchy of the various thugs who lorded over

their private little domains down here in this forgotten section of the wider city.

Drizzt looked back to the left, to the smaller structure across the alleyway and the hastily-boarded window that faced this structure's second floor.

"It is empty," Catti-brie said.

"You have checked that one as well?"

Catti-brie walked up beside Drizzt and led his gaze with a pointing finger to the one window, and Drizzt caught on from the variations in hue along the side panels that a strategically-placed board had been recently removed.

"A clear view into the interview chamber."

"Right to the leader's seat, no doubt," the drow said dryly, and when he glanced at his companion, her wry smile told him that he was, of course, correct.

They were face to face then, and barely a couple of inches apart. The two, human woman and drow elf, were almost exactly the same height, and though he was more heavily muscled, Drizzt's lean frame put him only a score of pounds heavier than the woman. The connection between them, the almost-magnetic pull, was surely there, but neither would take it farther than friendship, for Catti-brie had just lost her fiancee, Wulfgar, the giant barbarian man who had been Drizzt's protege in battle, and who had given his life in sacrifice so that she and her adoptive father, the dwarf Bruenor Battlehammer, could escape the clutches of a demon yochlol.

The pain of that loss resonated deeply within the two. With the threat from the Underdark eradicated, they had put Mithral Hall behind them, had physically distanced themselves from the dwarven homeland. But emotional distance was usually measured in time, not miles.

That baggage did not change the sincere admiration that Drizzt held for the woman, though, nor did it make him emotionally push aside that admiration for any fears that it would lead him down a more dangerous and unwanted road. Catti-brie had initiated their present plan the day after *Sea Sprite*, the pirate-hunting ship of their friend Captain Deudermont, had appeared in Waterdeep harbor.

They wanted to go aboard and sail with Deudermont, and likely, had they walked to the plank where the ship was moored, the Captain would have welcomed them aboard with a wide smile and opened arms. But Catti-brie, ever in search of adventure and hardly afraid of a risk, had convinced Drizzt to up the stakes. She had led the way into the tavern, had gone in alone, actually, night after night. She had formulated the plan, confirmed the lay-out, and had dragged Drizzt every step of the way to this point.

"Go and get some rest," Drizzt bade her. He drew forth his two thin-bladed scimitars, one proffered from the lair of a vanquished white dragon and possessed of mighty magic, the other, also powerfully enchanted, the gift of a arch-wizard. He placed them together and wrapped them in cloth, then tied off the bundle and slung it over his shoulder.

"Three hours after sunset?" Catti-brie asked.

Drizzt nodded, then paused, and thinking ahead, he drew out from his belt pouch a small onyx figurine shaped in the likeness of a black panther. He offered Catti-brie a smile and a wink, and tossed the enchanted statuette to her.

Catti-brie felt the magnificent workmanship of the idol, then tucked it away and answered Drizzt's smile with a nod, accepting the great responsibility he had just placed upon her, the great faith he had just put in her.

A moment later, the drow shooed her away, then, with a glance up and down the empty alley, he sorted out a path to the lone second-floor window on this side of the building and began to climb. He went in, confirmed the lay-out as Catti-brie had described it, even the line of windows, one building to the other, and nodded. The window in this building, too, was partially covered by boards, but Drizzt decided against removing any, for fear of tipping off the intended victims.

He came back out a short while later, without his baggage.

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The black skinned elf walked into the common room of the tavern with all the swagger he could muster. He knew that every eye would

turn upon him. He knew that every hand would go to a sword or dagger, that every muscle would tighten in hatred and fear. That was the reputation of his race—well-earned, he agreed, and so he accepted the initial fear and hatred he inevitably inspired as a simple fact of his life. He knew, too, that his own reputation might precede him in this particular section of this particular city, and so he wasn't traveling openly, but hid his most telling feature, his lavender eyes. He had his thick and long white hair combed in front of his face, covering his left eye, and over his right eye he wore a black patch of fine netting that afforded him a darkened, but acceptable, view of his surroundings.

He wore dirty and somewhat ragged clothing, loose fitting and with an old blanket set about his shoulders as a cloak. His belt was a simple sash of cheap material, and tucked into it was a long and unremarkable dagger. He didn't want to get into a fight, so poorly armed and armored, and thus he assumed the confident swagger, playing upon every fear and prejudice that surface-dwellers rightly held for the race of drow.

He moved right up to the bar and noted the scowl of the tavernkeeper.

"Fear not," he said, distorting the words as if the language was unfamiliar to him. "I ask of you no drink, buffoon. I come to speak to Thurgood of Baldur's Gate, and have no business with you."

The tavernkeeper scowled more fiercely.

"You will be dead before you realize that you've insulted me," Drizzt promised.

That seemed to back the man off somewhat. Across the bar from him, and just down from Drizzt, a young woman, a serving wench, whispered to the tavernkeeper, "Don't ye be a fool," then turned to Drizzt.

"Thurgood's there," she said, indicating a table in the back corner of the common room. "The big one with the beard."

Drizzt had known that all along, of course, since Catti-brie had been thorough in her investigation.

"Ye should bring him a drink, ye know," the woman went on. "He's wanting a drink with every introduction to those wanting to

sail with him."

Drizzt stared at the man, then turned to consider the tavernkeeper, who seemed as defiant and unmoving as ever. "Mayhaps I'll bring him the head of the owner, that he can claim all the drink as his own."

The man bristled, as did several of the folk seated at the bar, ruffians all, but Drizzt knew how to properly play a bluff, and he just calmly walked away, cutting a straight line for Thurgood's table.

The gazes of all four men seated at that table, as well as all of those standing nearby, were upon the drow through every stride, and Drizzt surveyed them all carefully, watching for the flicker of movement that might show an attack. He wished he had his scimitars with him, instead of a simple long knife. He had no doubt that every man in the tavern knew well how to put a weapon to quick and deadly use.

Catti-brie wasn't covering his moves this time.

He walked right up between the two closest seated men, to the table's edge.

"Seek I one Thurgood of Baldur's Gate," he said, twisting his mouth as if the common language of Waterdeep was uncomfortable and unnatural to him.

Across the table from him, the barrel-chested man crossed his arms over his chest and brought one hand up to stroke his thick and wild black beard.

"Thurgood you are?"

"Who's askin'?"

"Masoj of Menzoberranzan," Drizzt lied, taking the name of a former associate, the one from whom he had taken the magical statuette that allowed him to summon the great panther Guenhwyvar to his side.

"Never heard o' no Masoj," Thurgood answered. "Never heard o' no Menzoberranzan."

"Of no consequence is that," Drizzt answered. "You seek crew. I am crew."

The big man cocked an eyebrow and turned slyly to his companions, all of whom began to chuckle. “Been on many boats, have ye?”

“Demon ships, sailing the planes of existence,” Drizzt answered without the slightest hesitation.

“Not sure it’s the same thing,” Thurgood replied, and Drizzt noted a slight tremor in his voice, one he was trying hard to hide, obviously, and one that betrayed his intrigue.

“Same thing,” said Drizzt.

Thurgood motioned to the man on his left, who reached down, untied his belt and tossed it, a rope, to Drizzt. Before Thurgood even started to offer instructions, Drizzt’s hands worked in a blur, tying off three different kinds of knots in rapid succession before tossing the rope back to the man. Fortunately for Drizzt, both of his voyages with Deudermont had not been idle ones as a mere passenger. Anyone sailing with *Sea Sprite* and her crew was expected to pull his weight, in work and in battle, and with his drow nimbleness, Drizzt had proven especially adept at tying off lines.

Thurgood nodded as he looked at the rope, but again worked hard to keep his face straight. His gaze went from the rope, to Drizzt’s eyepatch, to Drizzt’s sash belt and the knife fastened there.

“Ye know how to use that thing?”

“I am drow,” Drizzt replied, and the man beside Thurgood scoffed. “Drow who do not fight well, die poorly.”

“So I been told,” said Thurgood, and he elbowed the doubting man.

“I will not die poorly,” Drizzt said, and as he did, he turned his head to fix the doubting man with an imposing stare, though of course, the drow’s eyes were covered. Still, the thug did wilt a bit under the forward-leaning and imposing posture that accompanied that hidden gaze.

“You seek crew. I am crew,” Drizzt repeated, turning square to Thurgood.

“Masoj of Menzoberranzan?”

Drizzt nodded.

“Ye come back in two days,” Thurgood instructed. “Right here. We’ll talk then.”

Drizzt nodded again, turned to glower at the man beside the big man, then snapped right about and walked casually away. He thought to draw out his knife and twirl it about, then go hand to hand a few times in rapid succession before fast tucking it back into his belt.

He brushed the thought away, though. Sometimes the most intimidating threat was the one not made.



His knife had been taken and he was blindfolded, but Drizzt had expected as much, and he knew well enough the steps along these alleyways and where Thurgood’s men were taking him. It did occur to him many times that the group might well kill him, and in that possibility, he would be completely helpless, unless, of course, Catti-brie was watching from afar. He had to trust in that.

Because it had to be this way.

He heard the wide wooden door creak open and smelled the stagnant air of the little-used warehouse. Inside, the small group walked a maze of piled sacks and large boxes to the back corner of the building, where they started up a wooden half-staircase, half-ladder. Despite the blindfold, the nimble Drizzt had no trouble at all in navigating the maze and the climb, and as soon as he came up to the second story, a man roughly pulled off his blindfold.

The drow was quick to shake his head, flopping his hair back over one eye, his dark, see-through eyepatch still in place on the other.

The room was as he remembered it, with the raised wooden dais set in the center-back, a wooden seat built atop it. Thurgood sat in that throne, resting comfortably back and to the side, eyeing Drizzt with what seemed to be little real concern.

“Welcome, Masoj of Menzoberranzan,” he said as Drizzt was led to stand before him. The guards fell away then, moving to either side of the room, and Drizzt used that opportunity to take a good measure of all in attendance. He quick-counted seven, scallywags all, and none seeming overly impressive, other than perhaps

Thurgood himself. Even that one didn't concern Drizzt too much. Likely, he would prove the typical bully brawler, a straightforward attacker who would try to quickly overwhelm an opponent with brute force.

Drizzt had left many similar brawlers dead in his wake.

"You wish to join the crew," Thurgood stated. "When will you be able to sail?"

"I have no ties and no responsibilities."

"I could walk ye to the dock straightaways and ye'd be able to step aboard?"

Drizzt paused for a second, noting the change in dialect, Thurgood's "you's" becoming "ye's." Those around him seemed to take no note. Perhaps this one was more worldly than he was letting on? The drow filed that notion away, a quiet reminder to be ready for anything, and quickly pushed past the pause.

"The sooner I am away from this city, the better," Drizzt replied. "There are many here who would wish me gone."

"Found a bit o' trouble, did ye?"

The drow shrugged as if it did not matter.

"Ye ever kill anyone, Masoj of Menzoberranzan?" Thurgood asked, and he leaned forward in his chair.

"More than anyone in this room," Drizzt answered, and he doubted he was lying. "More than all of you together."

Thurgood slumped back in his chair, eyeing the drow and smiling … weirdly, Drizzt thought. At the side of the room, several of the men bristled as if insulted, and the two who had taken Drizzt to this place cautiously approached.

"Well, then," Thurgood said, his tone, demeanor and accent changing. "Consider yourself taken down by your own words, then, Masoj of Menzoberranzan. Damned by a confession."

The two flanking Drizzt leaped for him, and the drow fell flat and dove forward, crashing against the front of the dais. His mind worked in one direction, summoning a globe of impenetrable darkness over the highest concentration of men, at the left-hand side of the large room, while his hands worked independently, tearing free the board he had loosened and replaced at the front of the dais.

Relief flooded through him when the felt the handles of his scimitars still in position within the cubby, and he rushed back and to his feet, yanking the blades free and raising them up high and wide to intimidate, to freeze in place for just an instant, those attackers closest.

The drow gave a great shout, seeming as if he would charge right for Thurgood, but instead, as he had planned, he dropped right to the floor before the large man.

He heard the splinter of wood behind him; he saw the flash of a silver-streaking magical arrow slash the air above him. He looked forward, expecting to see Thurgood pinned through the chest to the wooden chair, but instead saw the flash of explosion as the arrow slammed against an invisible, magical shield—a globe, he realized, as the lines of sparking blue power fingered out in a tree-like semi-circle about the pirate leader.

The drow muttered a curse under his breath, but had no time to dwell on the unexpected turn, for the two attackers were on him then, even as he rose again. His scimitars worked independently, batting aside surprisingly skillful and coordinated thrusts.

The drow pivoted right, letting his right arm fly out behind him, his scimitar slashing across to defeat a second thrust from the attacker to his left, who was now behind him, while his other blade worked fast and hard against the one presented before him. He tapped the sword outside, moving it across to his right, and then again, and then, surprising his attacker and moving with blinding speed, he brought his left-hand scimitar in a third time, but down lower, hooking it under the blade and yanking it out wide the other way. A short riposte had that scimitar thrusting in hard, scoring a hit that sent the attacker falling to the floor and clutching his chest.

Drizzt hadn't the time to finish the move, and instead leaped forward and to the side, throwing himself into a forward roll. The man behind him pursued, but a second crackle of wood signaled Catti-brie's second shot from across the way. The arrow hummed through the air, clipping the man pursuing Drizzt and sending him falling away in pain as the bolt soared past, to again explode against the globe protecting Thurgood.

Drizzt heard that explosion, but didn't see it as he charged the next three men in line. He came in low, blades leading, and the closest man dropped his axe down low to intercept the thrust. But then Drizzt leaped high, without slowing in the least, coming in above the man's rising axe. He planted a foot on the surprised man's chest and sprang away toward the next man in line. The drow's legs wagged wildly to avoid the upraised sword of the second man, and he even managed a snap-kick at the man's face as he came down to the side. Again, his scimitar was in place to defeat the thrust of the attacker's sword, and he even started to counter with his second blade.

But the man proved amazingly resilient, and Drizzt only then realized that the sword thrust had been a feint, and that the real danger was coming from the man's second weapon, a dagger.

He threw his hips out wide to avoid, but still got cut across the side, and then he had to throw himself backwards and again to the side as the third man came in at him.

He followed right through the roll, coming easily back to his feet and reversing his momentum, and indeed, catching both pursuers by surprise.

Suddenly inside the reach of their long swords, Drizzt pumped his fists and sent his blades in a whirl of motion, scoring minor slashing hits and solid smashes into their respective faces. Not waiting to see if they could withstand that barrage, the drow fast-stepped through.

He cut a quick turn, then froze, startled, as did everyone else in the room, as another arrow plowed through the partially boarded window, and then another right behind.

"Masoj of Menzoberranzan!" Thurgood roared, and Drizzt spun on him.

The man stood on the dais, his shield still crackling with dispersing energy from the last two hits, his face locked in an expression of outrage.

Drizzt did a quick scan. The men across the way had escaped his globe of darkness and regrouped. For all his efforts and surprise, Drizzt had only taken three men out of the fighting, and Catti-brie

had been ineffective, other than the one arrow that had accidentally clipped a pursuer.

And now that surprise was gone.

There was only one chance, it seemed, and with an accepting grin on his face, the drow took it, charging the dais, knowing he could get there before Thurgood's men could intercept and hoping that the magical shield wouldn't stop him.

Barely three running strides away, Drizzt saw Thurgood flash his hands forward, saw a flare of energy from a ring the man was wearing, and got hit by a blast of wind so powerful that it stopped him in his tracks and sent him flying backwards in a wild tumble!

Drizzt somewhat controlled his roll, but still smashed hard into the wall all the way across the room from Thurgood, below and to the side of the window through which Catti-brie's arrows had flown. He put his feet under him as fast as possible, expecting pursuit from the many pirates, but saw that it was Thurgood again who was most menacing. The man waggled his fingers and darts of energy shot forth, speeding across the room. Drizzt, as nimble as any fighter in Waterdeep, tried to dodge this way and that, but the magical bolts swerved and pursued and burned into him.

He fought through the stinging pain, he dismissed his surprise that this brutish-looking ruffian was, in fact, a wizard, and his senses caught just enough of an indication of spellcasting for him to react.

He dove flat to the floor as a tremendous bolt of lightning scarred the air above him, blowing out a hole in the wall behind him, its thunderous report and brilliant flash sending men all about the room stumbling back in a blinded daze.

"Kill him!" Thurgood demanded, and his crack crew moved in from every angle.

Drizzt knew he was dead, that there was no escape. He leaped back to his feet, prepared to kill several before he died, and then he fell aside again as the remaining wooden planks over the window burst inward and a great black form crashed into the room.

Guenhwyvar!

Silently praising Catti-brie for putting that magical, summoning statuette to such timely use, ready to turn the tide as the pirates fell

back in awe and terror before the six-hundred pound black panther, Drizzt set himself for a second charge.

Guenhwyvar hit the ground running, cut fast left and crashed into a pair of men, sending them flying, then cut back to the right and leaped for Thurgood.

A second blast of wind came forth, buffeting the panther and stopping her momentum. But unlike Drizzt, Guenhwyvar was not blown aside, and instead landed before the dais, digging her claws into the wooden planking to resist the continuing, and then the next, blast of wind.

From the look on Thurgood's face, Drizzt knew that the wizard understood that he was in dire trouble.

So did the rest of the pirates, even more so when one near the stairway lurched forward, his shoulder torn by an arrow that blasted past and slammed hard into the ceiling.

And up the stairs came Catti-brie, her bow thrown aside and Cutter, her sentient and vicious and incredibly sharp sword in hand.

Thurgood turned to flee.

Guenhwyvar buried him where he stood.

Those men near Catti-brie fell over her in a rush, her sword working furiously to fend.

Drizzt leaped at the nearest duo, downward parrying both their swords with his left-hand scimitar, but not following down with the blade, but rather, suddenly releasing his opponents' weapons as his second scimitar came up under them, using his opponents' own inclination to help them lift their blades high.

Too high, and Drizzt went down low, to his knees, the opening clear. Both his blades started for exposed mid-sections, the pirates unable to defend.

"Drizzt Do'Urden!"

The call froze him, froze everyone, and all eyes, even Guenhwyvar's, even those of Thurgood, who was struggling under the cat, glanced to the side, to see a tall and neatly-groomed middle-aged man stride into the room. He wore a long-tailed surcoat, with large brass buttons, and a cutlass was strapped to one hip.

“Deudermont?” Drizzt asked incredulously, surely recognizing the Captain of *Sea Sprite*.

“Drizzt Do’Urden,” Captain Deudermont said again, smiling, and he turned to Drizzt’s companion and said, “Catti-brie!”

All weapons lowered. A pair of men, priests obviously, rushed into the room from behind Deudermont, running to tend to the wounded.

“You were using this front to trap pirates?” Catti-brie asked.

“As were you?” the Captain asked back.

“Get this flea-ridden beast off of me,” came a growling demand, and they all turned to see Thurgood, flat on his back, Guenhwyvar straddling him.

Except of course, it wasn’t Thurgood and wasn’t any pirate captain, and as soon as Guenhwyvar stepped aside, the man, looking thin now, and dressed in robes, his magical disguise dismissed, stood up and brushed himself off imperiously.

Drizzt recognized him then as *Sea Sprite’s* resident wizard.

“Robillard?”

“The same,” said Deudermont, dryly and not without a bit of teasing aimed at the proud wizard.

Robillard scowled, and that made Drizzt recognize and remember the dour man even more acutely.

Drizzt pulled off his eyepatch and brushed his hair back, revealing his tell-tale lavender eyes as all the room about him settled fast, with weapons going back into sheaths. Still, more than a few of the men held wary gazes turned Drizzt’s way, and two of them even kept their weapons in hand.

For Drizzt, a drow making his way on the surface world where his race was feared and hated, there was little surprise in that reaction.

“To what does Waterdeep owe this visit?” Captain Deudermont asked as he came over, Catti-brie moving beside him. “And how fares King Bruenor and Mithral Hall?”

“We came to find *Sea Sprite*,” Drizzt explained. “To accept Captain Deudermont’s offer to sail with him in the chase for pirates.”

The Captain’s face brightened at that remark, though more than a few of the men at the sides bristled once more.

“It would seem we have much to discuss,” Deudermont said.

“Indeed,” Drizzt replied. “We had hoped to provide a dowery upon our arrival, but it seems as if our dowery was in fact your own crew.”

Deudermont turned slyly to Catti-brie. “Your doing, no doubt.”

The woman shrugged.

“Here now, don’t you be telling us that we’re to sail beside a drow elf,” one of the men still holding a sword dared to remark.

“This is not any drow elf,” Deudermont replied. “You are new to the crew, Mandar, and so you do not remember the times these two sailed with us.”

“That’s not to matter,” said the other man who stood holding a weapon, and he, too, had only joined with *Sea Sprite* recently. “Drow’s a drow.”

A third voice echoed that sentiment, and several other men by the wall began to nod.

Deudermont offered Drizzt a wink and a shrug, and as Drizzt began to remark that he accepted the judgment without complaint, the tall Captain silenced him with an upraised hand. “I offered Drizzt Do’Urden a place aboard *Sea Sprite*,” Deudermont said to them all. “A place earned by deed and not dismissed by the reputation of his race.”

“You cannot blame them their concern,” Robillard said.

Deudermont paused and thought on those words for a long moment. He looked to Drizzt, who stood impassively, Guenhwyvar by his side. He looked to Catti-brie, standing on the other side, and seeming far less accepting of the prejudice. She stared hard back at him, and Deudermont realized that her scowl was the only thing holding back tears of frustration.

“Ah, but I can and do blame them, my friend Robillard,” the Captain stated, turning to sweep them all under his wilting gaze. “I say that Drizzt Do’Urden is a worthy shipmate, proven in deed, and not only aboard *Sea Sprite*. Many here witnessed his work—you yourself among them.”

“I did,” the wizard admitted.

Drizzt started to say something, for he saw where this was leading, and never had it been his intent to incite a mutiny of *Sea Sprite's* fine crew. But again, Captain Deudermont turned to him and stopped him before he could really begin the remarks, this time with a genuine and unconcerned smile.

"Often do I try to measure the character of my crew," the Captain said quietly to Drizzt and Catti-brie. "This moment I see as an opportunity to look into a man's heart."

He turned back to the crewmen. "Drizzt will sail with *Sea Sprite*, and glad am I to receive him, and glad will all be when we engage with the pirates to have his curved blades working beside us, and his great panther beside us, and the marvelous Catti-brie beside us!"

The murmurs of protest began, but Deudermont spoke over them.

"Any who cannot accept this are dismissed from the crew," he said. "Without judgment and without shame, but without recourse."

"And if ye lose the whole of *Sea Sprite's* crew?" one tough-looking leather-faced sailor said from the side.

Deudermont shrugged as if it did not matter, and indeed, Drizzt understood the genuine intentions behind that dismissal. "I will not, for Robillard is too great a man to surrender to such prejudices."

He looked to the wizard, who turned to scowl at the crew, then walked over to stand beside Drizzt and Catti-brie—opposite of Guenhwyvar, however.

A moment later, another man walked over, and then a pair more. Then came one of the priests, along with the man who had been clipped by Catti-brie's arrow.

Within a minute, the only two not standing beside Drizzt were the first two who had questioned the decision, both of them still standing, weapons in hand. They looked to each other and one said, "I ain't for sailing with no drow."

The other slid his weapon away and held up his hands, then turned to join the others.

"What're ye doing, Mandar?"

"Deudermont says he's okay."

"Bah!" the first snorted, and he spat upon the floor. He stuck his weapon in his belt and stomped toward the group.

But Deudermont stopped him with an upraised hand. “You’ll not accept him. Not truly. And so I do not accept you. Come to *Sea Sprite* in the morning for your final pay, and then go where you will.”

“But …” he started to protest.

“Your heart is clear to me, and it is not acceptable. Be gone.”

The man spat again, turned and stormed away.

“He was willing to join us,” Mandar protested.

“In body, but not in heart,” explained Deudermont. “When we are out there, on the open waters, we have no one to depend upon but each other. If a pirate’s sword was about to slay Drizzt Do’Urden, would he have rushed to block it?”

“Would any?” Mandar remarked.

“Fare well, Mandar,” Deudermont said without the slightest hesitation. “You, too, may come to *Sea Sprite* in the morning for your final payment.”

Mandar stuttered and spat, then gave a little laugh and walked away.

Deudermont didn’t watch him go, but turned to his crew and said, “Any others?”

“We did not mean to cause such trouble,” Drizzt remarked when it was apparent that no one else would leave.

“Trouble?” Deudermont echoed. “For *Sea Sprite*, I judge a man’s worth by his blade. But that is second, for more important is his character, is his willingness to put all aside and serve in absolute unity with the rest of the crew. Any who cannot do that are not welcomed to sail with me.”

“I am drow. This is not a typical situation.”

“Indeed, it is one of those times when I can see more clearly into the heart of a man. *Sea Sprite’s* crew is stronger this day, and not just for the addition of two …” he looked down at Guenhwyvar and corrected, “of three valuable newcomers.”

Drizzt looked to Catti-brie, who was smiling widely, and he understood that her contentment was justified. This was Captain Deudermont, as they remembered him, and both had silently prayed

that their memories had not stilted with the passage of time and their fervent hopes that had taken them across so many miles.

"Welcome aboard, Drizzt Do'Urden, Catti-brie and Guenhwyvar," Deudermont said, warmly and honestly.

The words rang like music in the ears of the rogue drow elf.

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COMRADES AT ODDS

As I wrote about Entreri and Jarlaxle in the short story anthologies while I was writing the next book featuring Drizzt, so I went to Drizzt in this short story while following the road with Entreri and Jarlaxle in the novels. Once again with "Comrades at Odds," I was tying up some of the loose ends in the Hunter's Blades Trilogy. I could have put this story into *The Lone Drow* or *The Two Swords* as an extra chapter, but in that format, the resolution of Drizzt and Ellifain would have seemed abrupt and the exploration of Tos'un's reaction to his unexpected opportunity would have forced many more scenes.

By tying up both of those loose ends this way, in a short story, I was able to feature these fairly momentous events under the glare of their own spotlight, rather than bury them in tales already thick with intrigue and a thousand other moving parts.

Regarding Ellifain, what this resolution came down to was the necessity of lifting some of the burden from the shoulders of Drizzt. You can only batter a character so far before breaking him, I fear, and surely the most tragic thing in Drizzt's life to date, worse even than losing his father, was the death of Ellifain. The tortured elf girl did not deserve her fate, one forced upon her by Drizzt's kin in a long-ago brutal raid. Her hatred was well rooted, if misplaced in her focus on Drizzt. Even so, Drizzt certainly understood her crazed and blind desire to see him dead. And so, when he killed her, he was struck by the double torment of injustice and guilt.

I lost my father back in 1985. We were close—very close. He was my friend, my coach, my dad. He was a very big part of my daily life, and his death came suddenly and unexpectedly. For all the pain that dark visitor brought that June 1985 day, I was able to quickly move through my grief to acceptance, and to an appreciation of the years we had spent together, mostly, I am sure, because there was nothing left unsaid between us. While I would have longed for a thousand more adventures with Dad, for him to see my kids grow into fine human beings, for him to see me finally get a novel published, for him to ride this adventure with me, there was little sense of things left undone, of things left unsaid. In short, I harbored no guilt regarding my Dad. We professed our love and friendship in everything we did, every day.

In *Sojourn*, Drizzt speaks of guilt as a two-edged sword, the most burdensome of all emotions, and also as a confirmation of conscience. He is, as are we all, often driven by that particular emotion, and in terms of loss, he comes to understand that grief is a thousand times more painful when it is accompanied by guilt. With Ellifain, he felt this most keenly, and once again Innovindil stepped up to help him through his dilemma, offering her own mortal body as a vessel of resolution. And once Drizzt could get past that guilt, he could come to accept the fate of Ellifain.

For Tos'un, I explored another common theme of these books. Through him and the choices he makes, particularly his defiance of Khazid'hea on the issue of killing Sinnafein, we see Obould on a micro scale, a place where pragmatism defeats evil, where a creature raised in such a distorted view of the world finds a moment of truth, perhaps. Like Obould, who was ironically infused through the cleric ceremony with the wisdom to perhaps escape the trappings of his orc heritage, Tos'un is faced with a decision of instinct versus pragmatism. Is there a better way for the drow elf, even if that better way means suppressing ancient hatred and prejudice? This same choice faces Drizzt and Bruenor in the wider war, of course: Is acceptance of Obould and his kingdom truly for the better good? On the surface, these might seem like easy questions—there is no doubt that Tos'un would be better off joining

with the surface elves. There is no doubt that Bruenor's hand will be forced by an overwhelming orc army and the lack of neighborly support. But there is always the matter of emotion, and these hatreds run deep.

Not unlike many conflicts in our own world, sadly.





Winter, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR)

He looked out at the night sky with an expression of complete derision, for the rogue drow, Tos'un Armgo, had hoped he would never again look upon the vast ceiling of the overworld. Years ago, during the drow raid on Mithral Hall, Tos'un had lost his companions and his House, preferring desertion to the continued insanity and deadly war that had gripped Menzoberranzan.

He had found friends, a group of similar dark elf renegades, and together the four had forged a fine life along the upper tunnels of the Underdark, and even among the surface dwellers—notably King Obould of the orcs. The four had played a major role in spurring the invasion that had taken Obould's army to the gates of Mithral Hall. The drow instigators had covertly formed an alliance between Obould and the frost giants of the northern mountains, and they had goaded the orc king with visions of glory.

But Tos'un's three drow companions were dead. The last to fall, the priestess Kaer'lic, had been slain before Tos'un's eyes by King Obould himself. Only his speed and sheer luck had saved Tos'un from a similar fate.

So he was alone. No, not alone, he corrected himself as he dropped a hand onto the crafted hilt of Khazid'hea, a sentient sword he had found beneath the devastated site where Obould had battled Drizzt Do'Urden.

Wandering the trails of Obould's newfound kingdom, with smelly, stupid orcs encamped all around him, Tos'un had reached the conclusion that the time had come for him to leave the World Above, to go back to the deep tunnels of the Underdark, perhaps even to find his way back to Menzoberranzan and his kin. A deep

cave had brought him to a tunnel complex, and trails through the upper Underdark led him to familiar ground, back to the old abode he had shared with his three drow compatriots. From there, Tos'un knew his way to the deeper tunnels.

And so he walked, but with every step his doubts grew. Tos'un was no stranger to the Underdark; he had lived the first century of his life as a noble soldier in the ranks of House Barrison del'Armgo of Menzoberranzan. He had led drow scouting parties out into the tunnels, and had even twice guarded caravans bound for the trade city of Ched Nasad.

He knew the Underdark.

He knew, in his heart, that he could not survive those tunnels alone.

Each step came more slowly and deliberately than the previous. Doubts clouded his thoughts, and even the small voice in his head that he knew to be Khazid'hea's empathetic communication urged him to turn back.

Out of the tunnel, the stars above him, the cold wind blowing in his face, Tos'un stood alone and confused.

We will find our place, Khazid'hea telepathically assured him. *We are stronger than our enemies. We are more clever than our enemies*.

Tos'un Armgo couldn't help but wonder if the sentient sword had included Drizzt Do'Urden and King Obould in those estimations.

A campfire flared to life off in the distance, or a cooking fire, and the sight of it reminded the drow that he hadn't eaten in more than a day.

"Let us go and find some well-supplied orcs," he said to his growling stomach. "I am hungry."

Khazid'hea agreed.

Khazid'hea was always hungry.

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Sunlight glistened off the white-feathered wings of the equine creature as Drizzt Do'Urden brought the pegasus in a steep bank and turn. Astride her own pegasus to the north of the drow elf, the elf Innovindil caught the view in dramatic fashion, contrasted as it was

by the great dark clouds hovering over the Trollmoors to the south. The pair had set out from Mithral Hall three days before, confident that the standoff between the dwarves of Clan Battlehammer and the invading orc army would hold throughout the brutal winter months. Drizzt and Innovindil had to go far to the west, all the way to the Sword Coast, to retrieve the body of Ellifain, a fallen moon elf and kin to Innovindil, slain at the hands of Drizzt in a tragic misunderstanding.

They had started out traveling south and southwest, thinking to pass over the city of Nesmé on the northern banks of the dreaded Trollmoors to see how the rebuilding was commencing after the carnage of the previous summer. They had thought to cross over Nesmé, skirting the Trollmoors so that they could catch a more southerly route to the west and the distant city of Luskan.

It was bitterly cold up in the sky with winter beginning to blow. Sunrise and Sunset, their pegasi mounts, didn't complain, but Innovindil and Drizzt could only remain in the air for short periods of time, so cold was the wind on their faces. Bruenor had given both of them fine seal coats and cloaks, thick mittens and hoods, but the wind bit too hard at any and all exposed skin for the pair to remain aloft.

As Drizzt came around in his lazy turn, Innovindil began to motion for him to put down on a plateau directly west of his position. But the drow beat her to the movement, motioning west and a bit to the north instead—and not for her to descend, but only to look.

Her expression soured as soon as she turned that way, for she didn't miss the drow's target: a line of black specks—orcs, she knew—moving south along a narrow trail.

Sunrise flew under her mount as Drizzt began a slow, circling descent. He put a hand to one of his scimitars and drew it a bit from its sheath, then nodded, silently asking the elf if she was up for a fight.

Innovindil smiled back at him as she guided Sunset into Sunrise's wake, following Drizzt's descent.

"They will cross just to the west of us," Drizzt said to her as she put down on a wide, flat rock a few feet to the side of him. She

couldn't see the drow's white smile, for he had pulled his scarf up over the bottom half of his face, but his intense lavender eyes were surely smiling at her.

Innovindil loosened her collar and pulled her hood back. She shook free her long golden hair, returned Drizzt's look, and said, "We have hundreds of miles before us, and winter fast approaching. Would you delay us that we might kill a few orcs?"

Drizzt shrugged, but as he pulled his scarf down, he still grinned with eagerness.

Innovindil could hardly argue against that.

"We should see what they're about," the drow explained. "I'm surprised to see any of the orcs moving this far to the south now."

"With their king dead, you mean?"

"I would have thought that most of the orcs would be turning back to the north and the security of their mountain holes. Do they mean to press forward with their attacks absent the unifying force that was Obould?"

Innovindil glanced to the west, though they had lost sight of the orcs during their descent. "Perhaps some, at least, have grown overconfident. So much of the land came so easily to their overwhelming numbers, perhaps they've forgotten the mighty resistance aligned against them."

"We should remind them," said Drizzt. He lifted one leg over the pegasus so that he sat sideways on the beast, facing Innovindil, then threw himself backward in a roll over the mount's back, flipping as he went to land lightly on his feet on the other side. He moved around under Sunrise's neck, patting the muscled creature as he went. "Let us see what they're about," he said to the elf, "then send them running."

"Those we do not kill outright," Innovindil agreed. She slid down from her saddle and unfastened her great bow from the straps behind the seat.

Trusting that the intelligent pegasi would remain calm and safe, the pair moved off with all speed, stealthy and nimble across the uneven stones. They headed northwest initially, thinking to approach the long ravine a bit ahead of the orcs, but the sound of

metal against stone stopped them and turned them back to the southwest.

A short while later, Drizzt crawled out onto a high outcropping of stone, and while he understood then the source of the hammering, he grew even more confused. For there below him, at a bottleneck along the trail, he saw a group of orcs hard at work in building a wall of cut stones.

"A gate," Innovindil remarked, creeping up beside him.

The pair watched as several orcs came up the trail from the south, carrying rocks.

"We need a better look," Innovindil remarked.

"The sun is fast setting," said Drizzt, pulling himself up and starting back to the east and the pegasi.

They had less than half an hour of daylight remaining, but in that time they found much more than they had anticipated. Just a few hundred yards from the as-yet-unfinished gate sat a blockade of piled stones, and a second had been thrown together a hundred yards ahead of that one. Sentries manned both posts, while workers disassembled the one closest to the gate, carrying the stones for cutting and placement on the more formidable wall.

The coordination and tactics could not be denied.

"The fall of Obould has not yet corroded their unity and precision," Innovindil remarked.

"They wear uniforms," Drizzt said. He seemed as if he could hardly draw breath—and from more than the cold wind, Innovindil could plainly see.

His words rang true enough to the elf, for the sentries at all three points wore similar skull-shaped helms of white bone and nearly identical black tabards.

"Their tactics are perfect," the drow went on, for he had seen many similar scenes during his time in Menzoberranzan among his warrior people. "They hastily set blockades to slow down any attackers so that they won't be caught vulnerable at their more permanent construction site."

"Orcs have always been clever, if not cohesive," the elf reminded him.

“It would seem that Obould has remedied the weakness of the latter point more completely than we had thought.” The drow looked around, his gaze drifting in the direction of Mithral Hall. “We have to investigate this more fully and go back to Bruenor,” he said as he looked back at his elf companion.

Innovindil held his stare for a short while, then shook her head. “We have already decided our course.”

“We could not know.”

“We still do not know,” the elf replied. “These southern orc scouts and laborers may not even yet know of Obould’s demise. We cannot measure what we see here as what we can expect a month from now, or after the winter season. In any case, the stalemate will hold with the coming snow and cold, and nothing we can tell King Bruenor now will alter his preparations for the winter.”

“You would still recover the body of Ellifain,” said Drizzt.

Innovindil nodded and replied, “It is important—for my people, and for our acceptance of you.”

“Is this a journey to recover a lost soul? Or is it to determine the veracity of a potential friend?”

“It is both.”

Drizzt leaned back as if stung. Innovindil reached out for him.

“Not for me,” she assured him. “You have nothing to prove to Innovindil, Drizzt Do’Urden. Our friendship is sincere. But I would have no doubts lingering among my sorely wounded and angry people. The People of the Moonwood are not many in number. Forgive us our caution.”

“They bade you do this?”

“There was no need. I understand the importance of it, and do not doubt that I, that all of my people, owe this to the lost one. Ellifain’s fall marks a great failing in the Moonwood, that we could not convince her of the error of her ways. Her heart was scarred beyond reason, but in offering her no remedy, we of the Moonwood can only see Ellifain’s fall as our failing.”

“How will retrieving her body remedy that?”

Innovindil shrugged and said, “Let us learn.”

Drizzt had no answer for that, nor did he think it was his place to question further. He had agreed to fly beside Innovindil to the Sword Coast and so he would. He owed her that, at least. But more importantly, he owed it to Ellifain, the lost elf he had slain.

They returned to their mounts and moved higher up on the trails as darkness fell and the cold closed in, accepting the less accommodating climate so that they could try to get a better understanding of what the orcs around them were up to. They found an overhang to block the biting northeastern wind and huddled close.

As they had expected, campfires came up. A line of lights ran off from the gate construction to the north. More curiously, every few minutes a flaming arrow soared into the night sky. For more than an hour, Drizzt measured the signal flares against the movements of the moon and the small star that chased it, and it wasn't long before he was nodding in admiration.

"Not random," he informed Innovindil. "They have devised a coded system of signaling."

For a long while, the elf didn't respond. Then she asked, "Is this how kingdoms are born?"

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The next day dawned warmer and with less of a wind, so Drizzt and Innovindil wasted no time in getting their flying horses up into the air. They set down soon after, moving into position on the bluffs above the gate construction, and soon realized that their suppositions were right on the mark. The orcs continued to coordinate the deconstruction of the protective barriers to the south with the construction of the more sophisticated gate. The caravan they'd first spotted arrived soon after, laden with supplies for the workers, and that, too, seemed quite extraordinary to the two onlookers.

No typically-orc squabbling came from below regarding the food and drink; it was passed out in an orderly fashion, with enough set aside to feed those orcs still working in the south upon their return.

Even more curiously, the guards rotated, with several caravan guards replacing those at the wall, who set out on the return journey to the north. The new guards, too, were dressed in the skull helmets and black tabards that seemed to be the uniform of Obould's minions.

Intrigued by the surprising orderliness of the orcs, the two elves, moon and drow, moved back from the ledges and put their mounts to the sky once again. They veered along a more northerly route, wanting to more fully explore the continuing organization of the orc army. They noted wooden pyres set on many hilltops—signal fires. They saw other well-guarded caravans moving out along the various trails like the tentacles of a gigantic octopus. The center of that creature, a huge encampment, was not hard to find.

They flew beyond it, continuing more north than west, and found new construction everywhere. Clusters of stone houses and incomplete walls showed across every snow-covered lea, and every other hilltop, it seemed, was set with the base stones of a new, fortified keep.

"Word does not spread quickly among the orcs, it would seem," Innovindil said when they landed in a secluded vale.

Drizzt didn't reply, but his doubting expression spoke volumes. All those orcs couldn't still be ignorant of an event as momentous as the fall of Obould Many-Arrows. Could it be that the cohesion Obould had spawned among his people would outlast him?

That possibility rattled Drizzt to his bones. The decapitation of the orc army, the death of Obould, was supposed to work like a cancer on the stupid beasts. Surely infighting and selfishness would destroy the integrity of their enemies; the nature of orcs would accomplish what Bruenor's army had not been able to.

"The tale is early in the telling," Innovindil said, and Drizzt realized that his fears were playing out on his face.

"Not so early."

"Our enemies have not been tested since Obould's fall," Innovindil said. "Neither by sword nor winter's fury."

"They are preparing for both, it would seem."

Innovindil touched her hand to the drow's shoulder, and he looked into her blue eyes. "Do not abandon hope," she reminded him. "Nor make judgments on things we cannot yet know. How will these remainders of the orc army fare when winter comes on in full? How will they manage when some tribe or another decides that it is time to return to the safety of its mountain hole? Will the others try to stop the retreat, and if they do, if orcs begin to battle orcs, how long will it take for the entire mass to feed upon itself?"

Drizzt glanced back to the distant trails and the working orcs and let his gaze linger there for some time. "It is too early to make a judgment," he finally agreed. "Let us go to the west and finish our task. Perhaps the day will shine brighter upon our return."

Innovindil took his hand and walked him back to the waiting pegasi, and soon they were on their way again, flying due west, the miles to Luskan rolling out below them. They set their course and held true, and they each tried to hold on to their reasoning that the events about them were not likely indicative of what they would find upon their return.

But they each glanced to the sides, and watched the continuing progress and cohesion of an orc force that was supposed to be disintegrating.

The sights of that day, the signal fires and coordinated flares of that night, and the sights of the next day, until they broke clear of the orcs in the Haunted Pass to the west, did not bolster their confidence.

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As a minor noble in a major House of Menzoberranzan, Tos'un Armgo had done many years of battle training at Melee-Magthere, the school of warriors. He had served under the brutal and legendary weapons master, Uthegental, who had distinguished himself among drow warriors with his fearsome, offensive style of battle. Never known for his subtlety, what Uthegental lacked in finesse he made up for in sheer strength and ferocity, and the Barrison del'Armgo warriors he commanded learned to strike hard and strike fast.

Tos'un was no exception. So when he descended upon a caravan of orcs, Khazid'hea in his right hand and a second sword in his left, he did not hesitate. He came down from on high in a great leap, stabbed out with his left as he landed beside the lead orc, then spun across with Khazid'hea and cut the foolish creature shoulder to hip. A sudden reversal and backhand sent Khazid'hea slashing at the next orc in line, who lifted a sack of supplies to block.

The blade, with an edge as fine as any in all the world, slid in and out of the bag, through the orc's raised arm, and into its surprised face with such ease Tos'un wasn't even sure he had hit the creature.

Until, that is, it fell in a blood-spraying heap.

Tos'un planted his foot on the fallen orc as he leaped forward, scoring another kill by stabbing Khazid'hea through the planks of the caravan's lead cart and into the chest of the orc that had leaped behind it for cover.

More! the sentient sword screamed in his head. It sent waves of rage at the drow, telepathic impartations that agitated him and drove him on with fury.

A pair of orcs moved to intercept, their swords out level to hinder him.

Out went Tos'un's second sword, tapping across left to right under the blade of the orc on his right. He rolled it under and tapped the underside of the other orc blade, then back again to the right and back to the left in a series of light parries. The orcs didn't resist, for the hits were not strong, but neither did they realize that the drow was walking their blades up ever so slightly.

Tos'un stopped in mid swing and tossed his second sword into the air to fly between the surprised orcs. In the same fluid movement, the drow dropped low and spun, slipping forward to one knee and ducking under the orcs' blades. Khazid'hea ripped across, shearing thick belts and leather tabards as if they were made of parchment.

Both orcs howled and fell away, grabbing at their spilling entrails.

Khazid'hea howled, too, but in pleasure—in Tos'un's head.

Another pair of guards came at the drow, each circling to the side and prodding at him with metal-tipped spears. He analyzed their

movements and ran through an internal debate about how to proceed, where to parry, and which counter to follow through.

When the thrust came, Tos'un proved more than ready. With his superior agility and speed, he slipped his foot back and half-turned, dodging the stab that passed behind him and slapping aside the one in front.

One step forward had him in range, and Khazid'hea tasted more orc blood.

The other foolish orc pursued the drow from behind, and Tos'un executed a brilliant backhand, behind-the-back deflection with his more mundane blade, spun following his own blade as he continued to force the spear aside, and bore in to put Khazid'hea through the orc's heart.

The sword flooded Tos'un with appreciation.

The drow saw an opening to the left, where an orc began scrambling away. He started that way but then cut back, having seen a pair of orcs running right, abandoning the wagon to save their lives. He took a few steps in pursuit, but his delay had cost him any chance of catching them quickly, so he sheathed his swords and went to the carts instead to realize the spoils.

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Khazid'hea went silent, but the sword was more intrigued than pleased. Tos'un was a fine wielder, a solid drow warrior, certainly superior to the human woman who had wielded the sword for several years before, a female warrior who too often favored her bow—a coward's weapon—over Khazid'hea's magnificent blade.

We have much to learn from each other, the sword related in Tos'un's thoughts.

The drow glanced down at Khazid'hea's hilt, and the sword could sense his trepidation.

You do not trust your instinctive warrior self, the sword explained.

Tos'un put down the food he had found and drew Khazid'hea from its sheath, holding the gleaming blade up before his red eyes.

You think too much, the sword imparted.

Tos'un paused for a bit, then resheathed the blade and went back to his food.

That was good enough for the time being, Khazid'hea believed. The drow had not dismissed the suggestion. The sword would be more prepared in their next fight to help the dark elf achieve a state of more fluid concentration, of heightened awareness, in which he could trust in his abilities and fully understand his limitations.

Not long before, Khazid'hea had been wielded by Drizzt Do'Urden, a champion among drow. That dark elf had easily dismissed any of the sentient weapon's intrusions because he had achieved a perfect warrior state of mind, an instantaneous recognition of his enemies and evaluation of their abilities. Drizzt moved without conscious consideration, moved in a manner that perfectly blended his thoughts and actions.

Khazid'hea had felt that warrior instinct, the concentration that elevated Drizzt above even a superbly trained warrior such as Tos'un Armgo. The sentient sword had studied its wielder intently in the fight between Drizzt and Obould, and Khazid'hea had learned from the master.

And the sword meant to teach that technique to Tos'un. Though this drow would never be as powerful in heart and will as Drizzt Do'Urden, that was a good thing. For without that inner determination and overblown moral compass even as he gained in physical prowess, Tos'un would not be able to deny Khazid'hea, as had Drizzt. The sword could make Tos'un as physically formidable, but without the dead weight of free will.

Khazid'hea could not settle for second best.

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"You have been very quiet these last days," Innovindil remarked to Drizzt when they pulled up to set their camp for the night.

The smell of brine filled their nostrils and the sunset that night shone at them across the great expanse of dark waters rolling in toward the Sword Coast. The weather had held and they put hundreds of miles behind them much more quickly than they'd anticipated. The two elves even dared to hope that, if good fortune

held, they could be back in Mithral Hall before winter came on in full, before the deep snows filled Keeper's Dale and the icy winds forced them to travel exclusively on the ground. In the air, the pegasi could cover thirty miles in a single day with ease, and those thirty miles were in a direct line to their goal, not winding around hillocks or following rivers for hours and hours until a ford could be found. On the ground, along the winding trails and empty terrain of the wilderness, where they had to beware of monsters and wild beasts, they would be lucky to travel ten miles in any given day, and luckier still if more than a third of those were actually in the direction of their goal.

"Our progress has been amazing," Innovindil went on when Drizzt, standing on a bluff and staring out at the sea, made no move to reply. "Rillifain is with us," she said, referring to an elf forest god, one of the deities of her Moonwood clan. "His calming breath is keeping the wintry blows at bay, that we might recover Ellifain and return with all speed."

She continued on, speaking of the god Rillifain Rallathil and the various tales associated with him. The sun's lower rim seemed to touch the distant water and still she talked. The sky turned a rich blue as the fiery orb disappeared behind the waves, and she realized that Drizzt was not listening, that he had not been listening to her at all.

"What is it?" she said, moving up beside him. She asked again a moment later, and forced him to look at her.

"Are you all right, my friend?" Innovindil asked.

"What did Obould know that we do not?" Drizzt asked in reply.

Innovindil took a step back, her fair elf face scrunching up, for he had caught her off guard.

"Are there good orcs and bad orcs, do you suppose?" Drizzt went on.

"Good orcs?"

"You are surprised that a goodly drow elf would ask such a question?"

Innovindil's eyes snapped open wide at that, and she stuttered over a reply until Drizzt let her off the hook with a disarming grin.

“Good orcs,” he said.

“Well, I am sure that I do not know. I have never met one of goodly disposition.”

“How would you know if you had?”

“Well, then, perhaps there are such creatures as goodly orcs,” an obviously flustered Innovindil conceded. “I’m sure I wouldn’t know, but I’m also sure that if such beasts exist, they are not the norm for that race. Perhaps a few, but which are more predominant, your mythical goodly orc or those bent on evil?”

“It does not matter.”

“Your friend King Bruenor would not likely agree with you this time.”

“No, no,” Drizzt said, shaking his head. “If there are goodly orcs, even a few, would that not imply that there are varying degrees of conscience within the orc heart and mind? If there are goodly orcs, even a few, does that not foster hope that the race itself will move toward civilization, as did the elves and the dwarves … the halflings, gnomes, and humans?”

Innovindil stared at him as if she didn’t understand.

“What did Obould know that we do not?” Drizzt asked again.

“Are you suggesting some goodness within King Obould Many-Arrows?” Innovindil asked with an unmistakably sharp edge to her voice.

Drizzt took a deep breath and held his next thoughts in check as he considered the feelings of his friend Innovindil, who had watched her lover cleaved in half by Obould.

“The orcs are holding their discipline and creating the boundaries of their kingdom even without him,” Drizzt said, and he looked back out to sea. “Were they ready to forge their own kingdom? Is that the singular longing Obould tapped into to rouse them from their holes?”

“They will fall to fighting each other, tribe against tribe,” Innovindil replied, and her voice still held a grating edge to it. “They will feed upon each other until they are no more than a crawling mass of hopeless fools. Many will run back to their dark holes, and those that do not will wish that they had when King

Bruenor comes forth, and when my people from the Moonwood join in the slaughter."

"What if they don't?"

"You doubt the elves?"

"Not them," Drizzt clarified, "the orcs. What if the orcs do not fall to fighting amongst themselves? Suppose a new Obould rises among them, holding their discipline and continuing the fortification of this new kingdom?"

"You can't believe that."

"I offer a possibility, and if so, a question that all of us—from Silverymoon to Sundabar, Nesmé to Mithral Hall, the Moonwood to Citadels Felbarr and Adbar—would be wise to answer carefully."

Innovindil considered that for a moment, then said, "Very well then, I grant you your possibility. If the orcs do not retreat, what do we do?"

"A question we must answer."

"The answer seems obvious."

"Kill them, of course."

"They are orcs," Innovindil replied.

"Would it truly be wiser for us to wage war upon them to drive them back?" Drizzt asked. "Or might allowing them their realm help foster any goodness that is within them? Allow it to blossom, for if they are to hold a kingdom, must they not necessarily find some measure of civilization? And would not the needs of such a civilization favor the wise over the strong?"

Innovindil's expression showed that she wasn't taking him very seriously, and truthfully, as he heard the words leaving his own mouth, Drizzt Do'Urden couldn't help but think himself a bit mad. Still, he knew he had to finish the thought, felt that he needed to speak it out clearly so that the notion might help him to sort things out in his own jumbled mind.

"If we are to believe in the general goodness of elf society—or dwarf, or human—it is because we believe that these peoples are able to progress toward goodness. Surely there are ample atrocities in all our respective histories, and still occurring today. How many wars have the humans waged upon each other?"

“One,” Innovindil answered, “without end.”

Drizzt smiled at the unexpected support and said, “But we believe that each of our respective peoples move toward goodness, yes? The humans, elves, dwarves—”

“And drow?”

Drizzt could only shrug at that notable exception and continue, “Our optimism is based on a general principle that things get better, that *we* get better. Are we wrong—shortsighted and foolish—to view the orcs as incapable of such growth?”

Innovindil stared at him.

“To our own loss?” Drizzt asked.

The elf still could not answer.

“Are we limiting our own understanding of these creatures we view as our enemies by thinking of them as no more than a product of their history?” Drizzt pressed. “Do we err, to our own loss, in thinking them incapable of creating their own civilization?”

“You presume that the civilization they have created over the eons is somehow contrary to their nature,” Innovindil finally managed to say.

Drizzt shrugged and allowed, “You could be correct.”

“Would you unfasten your sword belt and walk into an orc enclave in the hopes that they will be ‘enlightened orcs’ and therefore will not slaughter you?”

“Of course not,” Drizzt admitted. “But what did Obould know that we do not? If the orcs do not cannibalize themselves, then by the admission of the council that convened in Mithral Hall, we have little hope of driving them back from the lands they have claimed.”

“But neither will they move forward,” Innovindil vowed.

“So they are left with this kingdom they claim as their own,” said Drizzt. “And that realm will only thrive with trade and exchange with those other kingdoms around them.”

Innovindil flashed him that incredulous look yet again.

“It is mere musing,” Drizzt replied with a quiet grin. “I do that often.”

“You are suggesting—”

“Nothing,” Drizzt was quick to interrupt. “I am only wondering if a century hence—or two, or three—Obould’s legacy might prove one that none of us have yet considered.”

“Orcs living in harmony with elves, humans, dwarves, and halflings?”

“Is there not a city to the east, in the wilds of Vaasa, comprised entirely of half-orcs?” Drizzt asked. “A city that swears allegiance to the paladin king of the Bloodstone Lands?”

“Palishchuk, yes,” the elf admitted.

“They are descendants, one and all, of creatures akin to Obould.”

“Yours are words of hope, and yet they do not echo pleasingly in my thoughts.”

“Tarathiel’s death is too raw.”

Innovindil shrugged.

“I only wonder if it is possible that there is more to these orcs than we allow,” Drizzt said. “I only wonder if our view of one aspect of the orcs, dominant though it may be, clouds our vision of other possibilities.”

Drizzt let it go at that, and turned back to stare out to sea.

Innovindil surprised him, though, when she added, “Was this not the same error that Ellifain made concerning Drizzt Do’Urden?”

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A stream of empty white noise filled Tos’un’s thoughts as he worked his spinning way through the orc encampment. He slashed and he stabbed, and orcs fell away. He darted one way and cut back the other, never falling into a predictable routine. Everything was pure reaction for the dark elf, as if some rousing music carried him along, shifting his feet, moving his hands. What he heard and what he saw blended into a singular sensation, a complete awareness of his surroundings. Not at a conscious level, though, for at that moment of perfect clarity, Tos’un, paradoxically, was conscious of nothing and everything all at once.

His left-hand blade, a drow-made sword, constantly turned, Tos’un altering its angle accordingly to defeat any attacks that might come his way. At one point as he leaped to the side of a stone then sprang

away, that sword darted out to his left and deflected a thrown spear wide, then came back in to slap a second missile, turning the spear sidelong so that it rolled harmlessly past him as he continued on his murderous way.

As defensive as that blade was, his other, Khazid'hea, struck out hungrily. Five orcs lay dead in the dark elf's wake, with two others badly wounded and staggering, and Khazid'hea had been the instrument of doom for all seven.

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The sentient sword would not suffer its companion blade the pleasure of a kill.

The ambush of the orc camp had come fast and furious, with three of the orcs going down before the others had even known of the assault. None in the camp of a dozen orcs had been able to formulate any type of coordinated defense against Tos'un's blistering pace, and the last two kills had come in pursuit of fleeing orcs.

Still, despite the lack of true opposition, Khazid'hea felt that Tos'un was fighting much better this day, much more efficiently and more reflexively. He wasn't near the equal of Drizzt Do'Urden yet, Khazid'hea knew, but the sword's continual work, blanketing the drow's thoughts with disruptive noise, forcing him to react to his senses with muscular memory and not conscious decisions, had him moving more quickly and more precisely.

Do not think.

That was the message Drizzt Do'Urden had taught to Khazid'hea, and the one that the sentient sword subtly imparted to Tos'un Armgo.

Do not think.

His reflexes and instincts would carry him through.

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Breathing hard from the whirlwind of fury, Tos'un paused beside the wooden tripod the orcs had used to suspend a kettle above a cooking fire. No spears came at him, and no enemies showed

themselves. The drow surveyed his handiwork, the line of dead orcs and the pair still struggling, squirming, and groaning. Enjoying the sounds of their agony, Tos'un did not move to finish them.

He replayed his movements in his mind, mentally retracing his steps, his leaps and his attacks. He had to look over by the boulder to confirm that he had indeed picked a pair of spears from mid air.

There they lay in the dirt by the stone.

Tos'un shook his head, not quite understanding what had just happened. He had given in to his rage and hunger.

He thought back to Melee-Magthere. He had been a rather unremarkable student, and as such, a disappointment to mighty Uthegental. At the school, one of the primary lessons was to let go of conscious thought and let the body react as it was trained to do.

Never before had Tos'un truly appreciated those lessons.

Standing amidst the carnage, Tos'un came to recognize the difference between ordinary drow warriors—still potent by the standards of any race—and the weapons masters.

He understood that he had fought that one battle as one such as Uthegental might have: a perfect harmony of instinct and swords, with every movement just a bit quicker than normal for him.

Though Tos'un didn't know how he had achieved that level of battle prowess, and wondered if he could do it again, he could tell without doubt that Khazid'hea was pleased.



Sinnafain moved from cover to cover amidst the ruined orc encampment. She paused behind a boulder then darted to the side of a lean- to where a pair of orcs lay dead. That vantage point also afforded her a wide view of the trails to the west, the direction in which the dark elf had fled.

She scanned for a few seconds, her keen elf eyes picking out any movement, no matter how slight. A chipmunk scurried along some stones about thirty feet from her. To the side, a bit farther along, a breeze kicked up some dried leaves and sent them twirling above the snowy blanket. The drow was nowhere to be seen.

Sinnafain scampered to the next spot, the overturned cooking tripod. She crouched low behind the meager cover it offered and again paused.

The breeze brought wisps of flame from the dying embers beside her, but that was the only life in the camp. Nodding, the elf held up her fist, the signal to her companions.

Like a coven of ghosts, the moon elves appeared from all around the dead camp, drifting in silently, as if floating, their white and dark brown cloaks blurring their forms against the wintry background.

"Seven kills and the rest sent running," remarked Albondiel, the leader of the patrol. "This drow is cunning and fast."

"As is his sword," another of the group of five added. When the others looked at him, he showed them one of the dead orcs, its arm severed, its heavy wooden shield cleanly cut in half.

"A mighty warrior, no doubt," Sinnafain said. "Is it possible that we've found a second Drizzt Do'Urden?"

"Obould had drow in his ranks as well," Albondiel reminded her.

"This one is killing orcs," she replied. "With abandon."

"Have drow ever been selective in their victims?" one of the others asked.

"I know of at least one who seems to be," Sinnafain was quick to remind. "I will not make the same errors as did my cousin Ellifain. I will not prejudge and be blinded by the whispers of reputation."

"Many victims have likely uttered similar statements," Albondiel said to her, but when she snapped her disapproving glare at him, she was calmed by his grin.

"Another Drizzt?" he asked rhetorically, and he shrugged. "If he is, then good for us. If not…."

"Then ill for him," Sinnafain finished for him, and Albondiel nodded and assured her, "We will know soon enough."

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Drizzt brushed the last of the cold dirt away, fully revealing the blanket. Beneath it lay the curled form of Ellifain, the misguided elf

who had posed as the male Le'Lorinel, and who had tried to kill him in her rage.

Drizzt stood and stared down at the hole and the wrapped body. She lay on her side, her legs tucked to her chest. She seemed very small to Drizzt, like a baby.

If he could take back one strike in all his life.…

He glanced over his shoulder to see Innovindil fiddling with one of the saddlebags on Sunset. The elf produced a silver censer set on a triangle of thin and strong chains. Next came a sprinkler, silver handled, green-jeweled, and with a bulbous head set with a grid of small holes.

Innovindil went back to the saddlebag for the oil and the incense, and Drizzt looked back to Ellifain. He replayed again the last moments of the poor elf's life, which would have been the last moments of his own life as well had not Bruenor and the others come barging in to his rescue, healing potion in hand.

His reputation had been her undoing, he knew. She could not stand to suffer his growing fame as a drow of goodly heart, because in her warped memories of that brutal evening those decades before, she saw Drizzt as just another of the vile dark elves who had slaughtered her parents and so many of their friends. Drizzt had saved Ellifain on that long-ago night by covering her with the blood and body of her slain mother, but the poor elf girl, too young on that night to remember, had never accepted that story.

Her anger had consumed her, and in a cruel twist of fate, Drizzt had been forced to inadvertently destroy that which he had once saved.

So intent was he as he looked down upon her and considered the winding roads that had so tragically brought them crashing together, Drizzt didn't even notice Innovindil's quiet song as she paced around the grave, sprinkling magical oil of preservation and swaying the censer out over the hole so that its scent would mask the smell of death.

Innovindil prayed to the elf gods with her song, bidding them to rescue Ellifain from her rage and confusion.

When Drizzt heard his own name he listened more intently to the elf's song. Innovindil bade the gods to let Ellifain look down upon the dark elf Drizzt, and see and learn the truth of his heart.

She finished her song so melodiously and quietly that her voice seemed to merge with, to become one with, the nighttime breeze. The notes of that wind-driven song carried Innovindil's tune long afterward.

She bade Drizzt to help her, then gracefully slipped into the hole beside Ellifain. Together they brought the corpse out and placed a clean second blanket around her, wrapping her tightly and tying it off.

"Do you believe that she is at peace?" Drizzt asked when they were done, both standing back from the body, hand in hand.

"In her infirmity, she remained worthy of Corellan's gentle hand."

After a moment, she looked at Drizzt and saw the uncertainty clear upon his handsome features.

"You do not doubt that," she said. "You doubt Corellan himself."

Still Drizzt did not answer.

"Is it Corellan specifically?" Innovindil asked. "Or does Drizzt Do'Urden doubt the very existence of an afterlife?"

The question settled uncomfortably on Drizzt's shoulders, for it took him to places he rarely allowed his pragmatic views to go.

"I do not know," he replied somberly. "Do any of us really know?"

"Ghosts have been seen, and conversed with. The dead have walked the world again, have they not? With tales to tell of their period in the worlds beyond."

"We presume ghosts to be … ghosts," Drizzt replied. "And those returned from the dead are vague, at best, from all that I have heard. Such practices were not unknown among the noble Houses of Menzoberranzan, though it was said that to pull a soul from the embrace of Lolth was to invoke her wrath. Still, are their tales anything more than cloudy dreams?"

Innovindil squeezed his hand and paused for a long while, conceding his point. "Perhaps we believe because to do otherwise is self-defeating, the road to despair. But surely there are things we

cannot explain, like the crackling magic about us. If this life is finite, even the long years an elf might know, then …”

“Then it is a cruel joke?” Drizzt asked.

“It would seem.”

Drizzt was shaking his head before she finished. “If this moment of self-awareness is short,” he said, “a flicker in the vastness of all that is, all that has been, and all that will be, then it can still have a purpose, still have pleasure and meaning.”

“There is more, Drizzt Do’Urden,” Innovindil said.

“You know, or you pray?”

“Or I pray because I know.”

“Belief is not knowledge.”

“As perception is not reality?”

Drizzt considered the sarcasm of that question for a long while, then offered a smile of defeat and of thanks all at once.

“I believe that she is at peace,” Innovindil said.

“I have heard of priests resurrecting the dead,” Drizzt said, a remark borne of his uncertainty and frustration. “Surely the life and death of Ellifain is not the ordinary case.”

His hopeful tone faded as he turned to regard his frowning companion.

“I only mean—”

“That your own guilt weighs heavily on you,” Innovindil finished for him.

“No.”

“Do you inquire about the possibility of resurrection for the sake of Ellifain, or for the sake of Drizzt Do’Urden?” Innovindil pressed. “Would you have the priests undo that which Drizzt Do’Urden did, that about which Drizzt Do’Urden cannot forgive himself?”

Drizzt rocked back on his heels, his gaze going back to the small form in the blankets.

“She is at peace,” Innovindil said again, moving around to stand in front of him, forcing him to look her in the eye. “There are spells through which the priests—or wizards, even—can speak with the dead. Perhaps we can impose on the priests of the Moonwood to hold court with the spirit of Ellifain.”

“For the sake of Drizzt Do’Urden?”

“A worthy reason.”

They let it go at that, and set their last camp before they would turn for home. Beyond the mountain ridge to the west, the endless waves crashed against the timeless stones, mocking mortality.

Innovindil used the backdrop of that rhythm to sing her prayers yet again, and Drizzt joined in as he assimilated the words, and it occurred to him that whether or not the prayers drifted to the physical form of a true god, there was in them power, peace, and calm.

In the morning, with Ellifain secured across the wide rump of Sunset, the pair turned for home. The journey would be a longer one, they knew, for winter grew thicker and they would have to walk their mounts more than fly them.



The orc overbalanced as Tos’un knew it would, throwing its cumbersome broadsword out too wildly across its chest. It stumbled to the side and staggered ahead, and Tos’un reversed his retreat to begin a sudden, finishing thrust.

But the drow stopped short as the orc jerked unexpectedly. Tos’un fell back into a defensive crouch, concerned that his opponent, the last of a small group he had ambushed, had feigned the stumble.

The orc jerked again then came forward. Tos’un started to move to block, but recognized that it was no attack. He stepped aside as the orc fell face down, a pair of long arrows protruding from its back. Tos’un looked past the dead brute, across the small encampment, to see a pale-skinned, black-haired elf woman standing calmly, bow in hand.

With no arrow set.

Kill her! Khazid’hea screamed in his head.

Indeed, Tos’un’s first thought heartily concurred. His eyes flashed and he almost leaped ahead. He could get to her and cut her down before she ever readied that bow, he knew, or before she could draw out the small sword on her hip and ready a proper defense.

The drow didn’t move.

Kill her!

The look on her face helped the drow resist both the sword's call and his own murderous instincts. Before he even glanced left and right, he knew. He might get one step before a barrage of arrows felled him. Perhaps two, if he was quick enough and lucky enough. Either way, he'd never get close to the elf.

He lowered Khazid'hea and turned back its stream of curses by filling his mind with fear and wariness. The sword quickly caught on and went silent in his thoughts.

The elf said something to him, but he did not understand. He knew a bit of the Elvish tongue, but couldn't decipher her particular dialect. A sound from the side finally turned him, to see a trio of elf archers slipping out of the shadows, bows drawn and ready. On the other side, three others made a similar appearance.

And more were still under cover, the drow suspected. He did his best to silently inform Khazid'hea.

The sword replied with a sensation of frustrated growling.

The elf spoke again, but in the common tongue of the surface. Tos'un recognized the language, but he understood only a few of her words. He could tell she wasn't threatening him, and that alone showed the drow where he stood.

He offered a smile and slid Khazid'hea into its scabbard. He held his hands up unthreateningly, then moved them out and shrugged. To either side of him, the archers relaxed, but only a bit.

Another moon elf moved out from the shadows, this one wearing the ceremonial robes of a priest. Tos'un bit back his initial revulsion at the site of the heretic, and forced himself to calm down as the cleric went through a series of gyrations and soft chanting.

He is casting a spell of languages, to better communicate with you, Khazid'hea silently informed the drow.

And a spell to discern truth from lies, if his powers are anything akin to the priestesses of Menzoberranzan, Tos'un replied.

As he completed the thought, the drow felt a strange calm emanating from the sentient sword.

I can aid you in that, Khazid'hea explained, sensing his confusion and anticipating his question. *True deception is a state of mind. Even*

from magical detections.

"I will know your intent and your purpose," the elf cleric said to Tos'un in words the drow understood perfectly, jarring him from his private conversation with the sword.

But that connection had not been fully severed, Tos'un realized. A continuing sense of pervading calm filtered through his thoughts and filtered the timbre of his vocal reply.

And so he passed through the priest's line of questioning, answering sincerely though he knew well that he was not being honest.

Without Khazid'hea's help, he would have felt the bite of a dozen elven arrows that day, he knew.



And where am I to run? Tos'un asked Khazid'hea much later. *What is there for me beyond the perimeter of this camp? You would have me hunting orcs for their rotten foodstuffs, or venturing back into the wilds of the Underdark where I cannot survive*.

You are drow, the sword answered. *You have stated before your hated of elves, the oppressors of your people. They are unsuspecting and off their guard, because of my help to you*.

Tos'un wasn't so sure of that. Certainly those elves nearest to him seemed at ease. He might get through a few of them. But what others lurked in the shadows? he wondered, and so the sword felt his question.

Khazid'hea had no answer.

Tos'un watched the elves moving around their camp. Despite their proximity to enemies, for they were across the Surbrin and in Obould's claimed territory, laughter rang out almost constantly. One took up a song in Elvish, and the rhythm and melody, though he could not know the words, carried Tos'un's thoughts back to Menzoberranzan.

Would you have me choose between these people and Obould's ugly kin? the drow asked.

Still the sword remained quiet in his thoughts.

The drow sat back, closed his eyes, and let the sounds of the elves' camp filter around him. He considered the roads before him, and truly none seemed promising. He didn't want to continue on his own. He knew the limitations and mortality of that route. Eventually, King Obould would catch up to him.

He shuddered as he considered the brutal death of his lost drow friend, the priestess Kaer'lic. Obould had bitten out her throat.

We can defeat him, Khazid'hea interrupted. *You can slay Obould and take his armies as your own. His kingdom will be yours!*

Tos'un had to work hard to stop himself from laughing out loud, and his incredulity served as a calming blanket over the excited sword. With or without Khazid'hea, there was no way Tos'un Armgo would willingly do battle with the powerful orc king.

The drow considered the road to the Underdark again. He remembered the way, but would it be possible for him to battle back to Menzoberranzan? The mere thought of the journey had him shuddering yet again.

That left him with the elves. The hated surface elves, the traditional enemies of his people. Might he really find a place among them? He wanted to kill them, every one, almost as badly as did his always-hungry sword, but he knew that acting on such an impulse would leave him without any options at all.

Is it possible that I will find my place among them? he asked the sword. *Might Tos'un become the next Drizzt Do'Urden, a rogue from the Underdark living in peace among the surface races?*

The sword didn't reply, but the drow sensed that it was not amused. So Tos'un let his own thoughts follow that unlikely course. What might his life be like if he played along with the surface elves? He eyed a female as he wondered, and thought that bedding her might not be a bad thing. And after all, among the surface elves, unlike in his own matriarchal society, he would not be limited by his gender.

But would he always be limited by his ebon skin?

Drizzt wasn't, he reminded himself. From everything he had learned over the past days, Tos'un knew that Drizzt lived quite well not only with the surface elves but with dwarves as well.

Could it be that Drizzt Do'Urden has created a path that I might similarly follow?

You hate these elves, Khazid'hea replied. *I can taste your venom*.

But that does not mean that I cannot accept their hospitality, for my own sake and not for theirs.

Will you stop fighting?

Again Tos'un nearly laughed out loud, for he understood that the only thing Khazid'hea cared about was wetting its magnificent blade with fresh blood.

With them, I will slaughter Obould's ugly kin, he promised, and the sword seemed to calm.

And if I hunger for an elf's blood?

In time, Tos'un replied. *When I grow tired of them, or when I find another more promising road.…*

It was all new, of course, and all speculative. The drow couldn't be certain of anything just then, nor was he working from any position of power that offered him true choices. But the inner dialogue and the possibilities he saw before him were not unpleasant. For the time being, that was enough.

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Drizzt stood, hands on hips, staring in disbelief at the signpost:

BEWARE! HALT!
The Kingdom of Many-Arrows
Enter on word of King Obould
Or enter and die!

It was written in many languages, including Elvish and Common, and its seemingly simple message conveyed so much more to Drizzt and Innovindil. They had spent a month or more traversing the wintry terrain to return to that spot, the same trail on which they had seen the orcs constructing a formidable and refined gate. That gate, which they had already carefully observed some fifty feet farther along the path to the north, showed design and integrity that would make a dwarf engineer proud.

"They have not left. Their cohesion remains," Drizzt stated.

“And they proclaim their king as Obould, and their kingdom takes his surname,” Innovindil added. “It would seem that the unusual orc’s vision outlasted his breath.”

Drizzt shook his head, though he had no practical answers against the obvious observation. Still, it didn’t make sense to him, for it was not the way of the orc.

After a long while, Innovindil said, “Come, the night will be colder and a storm is brewing. Let us be on our way.”

Drizzt glanced back at her and nodded, though his thoughts were still focused on that sign and its implications.

“We can make Mithral Hall long before sunset,” he asked.

“I wish to cross the Surbrin,” Innovindil replied, and as she spoke she led Drizzt’s gaze to the form of Ellifain strapped over Sunset’s back, “to the Moonwood first, if you would agree.”

With the weather holding and the sun still bright, though black clouds gathered in the northeast, they flew through Keeper’s Dale and past the western door of King Bruenor’s domain. Both of them took comfort in seeing that the gates remained solid and closed.

They crossed around the southern side of the main mountain of the dwarven homeland, then past the wall and bridge that had been built east of the complex. Several dwarf sentries spotted them and recognized them after a moment of apparent panic. Drizzt returned their waves and heard his name shouted from below.

Over the great river, partially covered in ice and its steel gray waters flowing swiftly and angrily, they set down, their shadows long before them.

The land was secure. Obould’s minions had not pressed their attack, and predictably, as their campfire flared in the dark of night, the snow beginning to fall, they were visited by a patrol of elves, Innovindil’s own people scouting the southern reaches of their domain.

There was much rejoicing and welcoming. The elves joined in song and dance, and Drizzt went along with it all, his smile genuine.

The storm grew stronger, the wind howling, but the troupe, nestled in the embrace of a thick stand of pines, were not deterred

in their celebration, their joy at the return of Innovindil, and their somber satisfaction that poor Ellifain had come home.

Soon after, Innovindil recounted the journey to her kin, telling them of her disappointment and surprise to see that the orcs had not gone home to their dark holes after the fall of King Obould.

"But Obould is not dead," one of the elves replied, and Innovindil and her drow companion sat intrigued and quiet.

Another elf stepped forward to explain, "We have found a kin of yours, Drizzt Do'Urden, striking at the orcs much as you once did. His name is Tos'un."

Drizzt felt as if the wind, diminished as it was through the thick boughs of the pines, might just blow him over. He had killed two other dark elves in the fight with Obould's invading army, and had seen at least two more in his personal battle. In fact, one of those drow, a priestess, had brought forth a magical earthquake that had sent both Drizzt and the orc king tumbling, Drizzt, with good fortune, to a ledge not far below, and Obould, so Drizzt had thought, into a deep ravine where he surely would have met his demise. Might this Tos'un be one of those who had watched Drizzt's battle with the orc king?

"Obould is alive," the elf said again. "He walked from the carnage of the landslide."

Drizzt didn't think it possible, but given what he had seen of the orc army, could he truly deny the claim?

"Where is this Tos'un?" he asked, his voice no more than a whisper.

"Across the Surbrin to the north, far from here," the elf explained. "He fights beside Albondiel and his patrol, and fights well by all reports."

"You have become accepting," Drizzt remarked.

"We have been given good reason."

Drizzt was hardly convinced.

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He is in the Moonwood, Khazid'hea reminded Tos'un one brilliant and brutally cold morning.

They were still out across the Surbrin, in the northern stretches of the newly-proclaimed Kingdom of Many Arrows, just south of the towering easternmost peaks of the Spine of the World. The drow tried not to respond, but his thoughts flickered back to Sinnafain's announcement to him that Drizzt Do'Urden had returned from the west and stopped in the Moonwood.

He saw you on that day he battled Obould, Khazid'hea warned. *He knows you were in league with the orcs*.

He saw two drow, Tos'un corrected. *And from afar. He cannot know for certain that it was me*.

And if he does? His eyes are much more attuned to the glare of the sun than are yours. Do not underestimate his understanding. He did battle with two of your companions, as well. You cannot know what Drizzt might have learned from them before he slew them.

Tos'un slid the sword away and glanced around the ring of boulders fronting the shallow cave that he and the elves had taken for their camp the previous night. He had suspected that Drizzt had been involved in the fall of Donnia Soldue and Adnon Khareese, but the sword's confirmation jarred him.

You will exact vengeance for your dead friends? Khazid'hea asked, and there was something in the sword's telepathy that led him to understand the folly of that course. In truth, Tos'un wanted no battle with the legendary rogue that had so upset the great city of Menzoberranzan. Kaer'lic had feared that Drizzt was actually in Lolth's favor, as chaos seemed to widen in his destructive wake, but even if that were not the case, the rogue's reputation still brought shudders up Tos'un's spine.

Could he bluff his way past Drizzt's doubts, or would the rogue just cut him down?

Good, Khazid'hea purred in his thoughts. *You understand that this is not a battle you are ready to fight*. The sword led his gaze to Sinnafain, sitting on a rock not far away and staring out at the wide valley beyond.

Kill her quickly and let us be gone, Khazid'hea offered. *The others are out or deep in Reverie—they will not arrive in time to stop you*.

Despite his reservations, Tos'un's hand closed on the sword's hilt. But he let go almost immediately.

Drizzt will not strike me down. I can dissuade him. He will accept me.

At the very least, he will demand my return, Khazid'hea protested, *so that he can give me back to that human woman*.

I will not allow that.

How will you prevent it? And how will Tos'un answer the calls of the priests when Khazid'hea is not helping him to defeat their truth-seeking spells?

We are beyond that point, the drow replied.

Not if I betray you, the sword warned.

Tos'un sucked in his breath and knew he was caught. The thought of going back out alone in the winter cold did not sit well with him, but he had no answer for the wretched sword.

Nor was he willing to surrender Khazid'hea, to Drizzt or to anyone. Tos'un understood that his fighting skills were improving because of the tutoring of the blade, and few weapons in the world possessed a finer edge. Still, he did not doubt Khazid'hea's estimation that he was not ready to do battle with the likes of Drizzt Do'Urden.

Hardly aware of the movements, the drow walked up behind Sinnafain.

"It is a beautiful day, but the wind will keep us about the cave," she said, and Tos'un caught most of the words and her meaning. He was a quick student, and the Elvish language was not so different from that of the drow, with many similar words and word roots, and an identical structure.

She turned on the rock to face him just as he struck.

The world must have seemed to spin for Sinnafain. She lay on the ground, the drow standing above her, his deadly sword's tip at her chin, forcing her to arch her neck.

Kill her! Khazid'hea demanded.

Tos'un's mind raced. He wanted to plunge his sword into her throat and head. Or maybe he should take her hostage. She would be a valuable bargaining chip, and one that would afford him many pleasures before it was spent, to be sure.

But to what end?

Kill her! Khazid'hea screamed in his mind.

Tos'un eased the blade back and Sinnafain tilted her chin down and looked at him. The terror in her blue eyes felt good to him, and he almost pulled the sword back, just to give her some hope, before reversing and cutting out her throat.

But to what end?

Kill her!

"I am not your enemy, but Drizzt will not understand," Tos'un heard himself saying, though his command of the language was so poor that Sinnafain's face screwed up in confusion.

"Not your enemy," he said slowly, focusing on the words. "Drizzt will not understand."

He shook his head in frustration, reached down, and removed the helpless elf's weapons, tossing them far aside. He jerked Sinnafain to her feet and shoved her away, Khazid'hea at her back. He glanced back at the cave a few times, but soon was far enough away to understand that no pursuit would be forthcoming.

He spun Sinnafain around and forced her to the ground. "I am not your enemy," he said yet again.

Then, to Khazid'hea's supreme outrage, Tos'un Armgo ran away.

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"It is Catti-brie's sword," Drizzt said when Sinnafain told him the tale of Tos'un a few days later, when she and her troupe returned to the Moonwood. "He was one of the pair I saw when I did battle with Obould."

"Our spells of truth-seeking did not detect his lie, or any malice," Sinnafain argued.

"He is drow," Innovindil put in. "They are a race full of tricks."

But Sinnafain's simple response, "He did not kill me," mitigated much of the weight of that argument.

"He was with Obould," Drizzt said again. "I know that several drow aided the orc king, even prompted his attack." He looked over at Innovindil, who nodded her agreement.

"I will find him," Drizzt promised.

“And kill him?” Sinnafain asked.

Drizzt didn’t answer, but only because he managed to bite back the word “yes,” before it escaped his lips.

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“You understand the concept?” Priest Jallinal asked Innovindil. “The revenant?”

“A spirit with unfinished business, yes,” Innovindil replied, and she couldn’t keep the tremor out of her voice. The priests would not undertake such a ritual lightly. Normally revenants were thankfully rare, restless spirits of those who had died in great tumult, unable to resolve central questions of their very being. But Ellifain was not a revenant—not yet. In their communion with their god, the elf priests had come to believe that it would be for the best to *create* a revenant of Ellifain, something altogether unheard of. They were convinced of their course, though, and with their confidence, and given all that was at stake, Innovindil was hardly about to decline. She, after all, was the obvious choice.

“Possession is not painful,” Jallinal assured her. “Not physically. But it is unsettling to the highest degree. You are certain that you can do this?”

Innovindil sat back and glanced out the left side of the wooden structure, to the hut where she knew Drizzt to be. She found herself nodding as she considered Drizzt, the drow she had come to love as a cherished friend. He needed it to happen as much as Ellifain did.

“Be done with it, and let us all rest more comfortably,” Innovindil said.

Jallinal and the other clerics began their ritual casting, and Innovindil reclined on the floor pillows and closed her eyes. The magic filtered through her gently, softly, opening the conduit to the spirit the priests called forth. Her consciousness dulled, but was not expelled. Rather, her thoughts seemed as if filtered through those of her former friend, as if she was seeing and hearing everything reflected off the consciousness of Ellifain.

For Ellifain was there with her, she knew, and when her body sat up, it was through Ellifain’s control and not Innovindil’s.

There was something else, Innovindil recognized, for though it was Ellifain within her body along with her own spirit, her friend was different. She was calm and serene, at peace for the first time. Innovindil's thoughts instinctively questioned the change, and Ellifain answered with memories—memories of a distant past recently brought forth into her consciousness.

The view was cloudy and blocked—by the crook of an arm. Screams of agony and terror rent the air.

She felt warmth, wet warmth, and knew it to be blood.

The sky spun above her. She felt herself falling then landing atop the body of the woman who held her.

Ellifain's mother, of course!

Innovindil's mind whirled through the images and sounds—confused, overwhelmed. But then they focused clearly on a single image that dominated her vision: lavender eyes.

Innovindil knew those eyes. She had stared into those same eyes for months.

The world grew darker, warmer, and wetter.

The image faded, and Innovindil understood what Ellifain had been shown in the afterlife: the truth of Drizzt Do'Urden's actions on that horrible night. Ellifain had been shown her error in her single-minded hatred of that dark elf, her mistake in refusing to believe his reported actions in the deadly attack.

Innovindil's body stood up and walked out of the hut, moving with purpose across the way to the hut wherein Drizzt rested. She went through the door without as much as a knock, and there sat Drizzt, looking at her curiously, recognizing, no doubt, that something was amiss.

She moved up and knelt before him. She stared closely into those lavender eyes, those same eyes she, Ellifain, had seen so intimately on the night of her mother's murder. She brought a hand up against Drizzt's cheek, then brought her other hand up so that she held his face, staring at her.

"Innovindil?" he asked, and his voice sounded uncertain. He drew in his breath.

“Ellifain, Drizzt Do’Urden,” Innovindil heard her voice reply. “Who you knew as Le’lorinel.”

Drizzt labored to catch his breath.

Ellifain pulled his head low and kissed him on the forehead, holding him there for a long, long while.

Then she pulled him back to arms’ length. Innovindil felt the warm wetness of tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I know now,” Ellifain whispered.

Drizzt reached up and clasped her wrists. He moved his lips as if to respond, but no words came forth.

“I know now,” Ellifain said again. She nodded and rose, then walked out of the hut.

Innovindil felt it all so keenly. Her friend was at last at peace.

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The smile that was stamped upon Drizzt’s face was as genuine as any he had ever worn. The tears on his cheeks were wrought of joy and contentment.

He knew that a troubled road lay ahead for him and for his friends. The orcs remained, and he had to deal with a dark elf wielding the ever-deadly Khazid’hea.

But those obstacles seemed far less imposing to Drizzt Do’Urden that morning, and when Innovindil—the whole and unpossessed Innovindil—came to him and wrapped him in a hug, he felt as if nothing in all the world was amiss.

For Drizzt Do’Urden trusted his friends, and with the forgiveness and serenity of Ellifain, Drizzt Do’Urden again trusted himself.

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If Ever They Happened Upon My Lair

Many years ago, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman suggested that the three of us, along with Ed Greenwood, should do a book together. The idea was to each write a novella with our signature characters, taking them through the same challenges. It sounded like a blast to me, but unfortunately, for one reason or another, it never got off the ground.

So when I was approached for *Dragons: Worlds Afire*, I was already softened to the idea. "If Ever They Happened Upon My Lair" is the only novella I've ever written, and I have to admit that I like the format much more than the short story. I've always been a fan of Fritz Leiber's novellas, and James Joyce's "The Dead" is probably my favorite piece of writing of all.

Since we weren't all writing the same conundrum for our heroes in this book, I was able to go back again to my favorite villains, Entreri and Jarlaxle. Although they don't appear in this tale, the events certainly tie in to their adventuring days in Vaasa and Damara, for once again, I'm writing a supplement to the novels.

I love the Bloodstone Lands, and I have since I read those old Douglas Niles game modules. It's no accident that many of the characters appearing in *Promise of the Witch King* come straight from those modules. I wrote the resource book for the region for the AD&D game, and wanted to set my "Monk Quintet" in these lands (but the Monk Quintet became the Cleric Quintet and went to other

reaches of the Realms). In addition, I'm intrigued by Zhengyi the Witch King—mostly because I know there's an inside joke about the creation of the lich dating back to the old TSR days, and no one will let me in on it!

I had a lot of fun with dragons in "Wickless in the Nether," so I was quite comfortable in letting these beasts take center stage here. And just because I'm using dragons doesn't mean I can't continue my exploration of yet another theme that has played so prominently in the Legend of Drizzt: mortality. Dragons live a long, long time in the Forgotten Realms, but is even that long enough, I wonder? I always hear people declaring, "I wouldn't want to live forever!" but I don't really believe them—not most of them, anyway. I'm sure for some there is such certainty in "what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil" that the sentiment is sincere and would hold in the face of the ultimate test. I expect that most people might say it, but when the moment of truth came, they'd recant if doing so would do any good.

And that really is the promise of the Witch King, after all, and the promise of vampires and the promise of most religions. So much of what we do in life relates to our fears and hopes of an afterlife, or an absence of one. This is the conundrum of rational, self-aware creatures, the eternal question of purpose or one big joke. Are we more than our mortal coils, or an accident of molecular combinations?

Drizzt claims that he is free of the petty concerns of life because he knows, truly understands, that he will one day die. How often have we heard a survivor of a terrible illness claim it to be the greatest blessing of her life because it has focused her so greatly on the present, reminding her to live each day as a blessing?

> To die, to sleep,
> To sleep, and perchance to dream?
> Aye, there's the rub.

Even for dragons.





Fill the buckets, grab a fish,” muttered Ringo Heffenstone, a dwarf with exceptionally broad shoulders, even for a dwarf, and a large, square head. Ringo was quite an exception among the group of dwarves who had ventured out into the mud lands of northeastern Vaasa in that he wore no beard. A gigantic handlebar mustache, yes, but no beard. An unfortunate encounter with a gnomish fire-rocket a few years before back in the hills of northwestern Damara, the southern and more civilized neighbor to Vaasa, had left a patch of scarred skin on Ringo’s chin from which no hairs would sprout.

It was a sad scar for a dwarf, to be sure, but with his typical pragmatism and stoicism, Ringo had just shrugged it off and redesigned his facial hair appropriately. Nothing ever really bothered Ringo. Certainly he could grump and mutter as well as the next dwarf about present indignities, such as his current position as water mule for the troop of dwarves, but in the end everything rolled out far and wide from him, eventually toppling off his broad shoulders.

He came to the bank of the pond, his friends a few hundred feet behind him tipping beers and recounting their more raucous adventures with ever-increasing volume.

A burst of howling laughter made Ringo cringe and look to the south. They weren’t far from Palishchuk, a city of half-orcs. They could have been there already, in fact, sleeping comfortably in a tavern. The half-orcs would gladly have taken their coin and invited them in. But though the half-orcs were no enemies of the dwarves, the troop had already decided they would avoid the Palishchukians if at all possible. Ringo and the others didn’t much like the way half-orcs smelled, and even though those particular half-orcs acted far

more in accordance with their human heritage than that of their orc ancestors, they still carried the peculiar aroma of their kind.

Another burst of laughter turned Ringo back to the encampment. As several of his drunken friends unsuccessfully shushed those howling loudest, Ringo shook his head.

He turned back to the pond, a vernal pool that formed every spring and summer as the frozen tundra softened. He noted the movement of some fish, flitting in and out of the shadows to the side, and shook his head again, amazed that they could survive in such an environment. If they could live through the extended Vaasan winter, in the shadow of the Great Glacier itself, how could he bring himself to catch one?

“Bah, but ye’re safe, little fishies,” the dwarf said to them. “Ye keep winning against this place and old Ringo ain’t got no heart for killin’ ye and eatin’ ye.”

He reached up and picked a piece of his dinner, a large bread crumb, from the left handlebar of his mustache. He’d been saving it for later, but he glanced at it and tossed it to the fish instead.

The dwarf grinned as the fish broke the surface, inhaling the crumb. Several others came up, making plopping sounds and creating interconnected rings of ripples.

Ringo watched the spectacle for a few moments then picked up one of his buckets and moved down to the water’s edge. He knelt in the mud and turned the bucket sidelong in the shallows to fill it.

Just as he started to tip the bucket back upright, a wave washed in and sent water overflowing the pail, soaking the dwarf’s hands and hairy forearms.

“Bah!” Ringo snorted, falling back from the freezing water.

He fell into a sitting position, facing the lake, and curled his legs to get away from the cold wash of the encroaching wave. His gaze went out to the water, where more rings widened, their eastern edges rolling in toward him.

Ringo scratched his head. It was a small pond, and little wind blew. They weren’t near any hills, where a rock or a tree might have tumbled from on high. He had seen no shadow from a falling bird.

“Waves?”

The dwarf stood up and put his hands on his hips as the water calmed. A glance to the side told him that the fish were long gone.

The water stilled, and the hair on the back of Ringo's neck tingled with nervous anticipation.

"Hurry it up with that water!" one of the dwarves from the camp called.

Ringo knew he should shout a warning or turn and run back to the camp, but he stood there staring at the still water of the dark pool. The meager sunlight filtered through the clouds in the west, casting lines of lighter hue on the glassy surface.

He knew he was being watched. He knew he should reach around and unfasten his heavy wooden shield and his battle-axe. He was a warrior, after all, hardened by years of adventure and strife.

But he stood there staring. His legs would not answer his call to retreat to the camp; his arms would not respond to his silent cries to retrieve his weapon and shield.

He saw a greater darkness beneath the flat water some distance out from shore, a blacker spot in the deep gray. The water showed no disturbance, but Ringo instinctively recognized that the blacker form was rising from the depths.

So smoothly that they didn't even form a ripple, a pair of horns poked up through the surface thirty feet out from the bank. The horns continued to climb into the air, five feet … seven … and between them appeared the black crown of a reptilian head.

Ringo began to tremble. His hands slid from his hips and hung loosely at his sides.

He understood what was coming, but his mind would not accept it, would not allow him to shout, run, or grab his weapon, futile as he knew that weapon to be.

The horns climbed higher, and the black head slipped gently from the water beneath them. Ringo saw the ridge of sharp scales, black as a mineshaft, framing the beast's head in armor finer than any a dwarf master smith might ever craft. Then he saw the eyes, yellow and lizardlike, and the beast paused.

The awful eyes saw him, too, he knew, and had been aware of him long before the beast had shown itself. They bored into him,

framing him with their own inner light that shone as distinctively as the beam of a bull's-eye lantern.

"Hurry it up with that water!" came the call again. "I'm wantin' to drink and pee afore the night comes on."

He wanted to answer.

"Ringo?"

"Heft-the-Stone, ye dolt!" another dwarf chimed in, using the nickname they had given to their principal pack mule.

The playful insult never registered in Ringo's senses, for his thoughts were locked on those awful reptilian eyes.

Run! Ringo silently screamed, for himself and for them.

But his legs felt as if they had sunk deeply into the gripping mud. He didn't run as the water gently parted to reveal the tapering, long snout, as long as his own body but graceful and lithe. Flared nostrils came free of the water, steam rising from them. Then came the terrible maw, water running out either side between the teeth—fangs as long as the poor dwarf's leg. Weeds hung from the maw, too, caught on those great teeth, trailing and dripping as the head rose up above the gray flatness of the pond.

Up it rose, and as it did, the beast drifted forward, slowly and silently, so that in the span of a few moments the dragon's head towered above the paralyzed dwarf, barely ten feet from the muddy bank.

Ringo's breath came in short gasps. Locked by the power of those awful reptilian eyes, his head tilted back as the head rose on the black-scaled, serpentine neck. Slowly, the dragon swayed, and Ringo moved with it, though he was totally unaware of his own motion.

Beautiful, he thought, for the grace and power of the wyrm could not be denied.

There was something preternatural, some power unbound by the limitations mere mortals might know, something godlike and beyond the sensibilities of the dwarf. Gone were any thoughts of drawing a weapon against so magnificent a beast. How could he presume to challenge a god? Who was he to even dare ask such a creature to think him worthy of battle?

Transfixed, entranced, overwhelmed by the power and the beauty, Ringo barely registered the movement, the snakelike speed of the strike as the dragon's head snapped forward, the jaws opening to fall over him.

The dragon was in the lake, swaying methodically.

There was darkness.

And Ringo knew no more.



"Bah, Heft-a-stone, will ye be quick about it, then?" Nordwinnil Fellhammer moaned, rising from his cross-legged position beside the campfire. "Suren that me lips are par—"

Nordwinnil's words caught in his throat as he turned to regard the pond and Ringo—or the two partial legs, knee-to-foot, standing in Ringo's boots where Ringo had just been. Nordwinnil's eyes widened and his jaw hung open as one of those legs tipped over, falling outward to plop into the mud.

"Yeah, me own throat as—" said another of the dwarves, and he, too, abruptly cut off his sentence as he turned toward the pond and saw the gigantic black dragon crouching in the water near the shore.

The beast chomped down, and one of Ringo's arms fell free to splash into the pond.

"D-d-d-d-*dragon*!" Nordwinnil screamed.

He tried to sprint out to the side but turned so furiously that he twisted his legs together and wound up tumbling headlong into the tent behind him. He thrashed and scrambled as all the dwarves began to shout. He heard a thump and knew it to be an axe slapping defiantly against a wooden shield.

The ground trembled as the beast came forth from the pond, and Nordwinnil scrambled all the more—and of course that only entangled him in the canvas all the more.

More cries assailed him, screams of fright and a growl of defiance. He heard a crossbow crank back, followed by the sharp click of the bolt's release, the hiss of the wyrm, the abbreviated shriek of the

dwarf archer, and the sloppy, crackling impact of the dragon's fangs biting the dwarf in half.

Nordwinnil tucked his legs and drove forward as a rain of dwarf blood sprinkled over him and the tent. He finally came out on the far side and kept on scrambling, crawling on all fours.

He couldn't shout past the lump in his throat when he heard his companions crying out, horribly shrieking, behind him. He didn't dare look back and nearly fainted with terror when he felt a slap on his back.

But it was a dwarf, good old Pergiss MacRingle, grabbing him by the collar and dragging him along.

Good old Pergiss! Pergiss wouldn't leave him behind.

With his friend steadying him as they went, Nordwinnil managed to get his legs under him and climb to his feet. On they ran, or tried to, for the ground shook as if an earthquake had struck. The dragon stomped down on another dwarf, crushing the poor fellow into the soft ground. Pergiss and Nordwinnil tangled up and crashed down, and both fought to regain their footing.

Nordwinnil looked back as the dragon turned their way, and those horrible eyes found him and held him.

"Come on then, ye dolt!" Pergiss cried, but Nordwinnil couldn't move.

Pergiss looked back, and the dragon snapped its great leathery wings out wide, stealing the meager remnants of daylight with its magnificent blackness.

"By the gods," Pergiss managed to say.

The dragon's head shot forward just a few feet, its jaws opened wide, and it blew forth a spray of green-black acidic spittle.

Nordwinnil and Pergiss lifted their arms before them to fend off the deadly rain, but the sticky, burning substance engulfed them.

They screamed. They burned. They melted together so completely that anyone who happened upon the scene would never know where Nordwinnil ended and Pergiss began.

There was silence again by the still pond near Palishchuk. The buzzards watched with interest, but they dared not take wing and caw.

⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔

He was Kazmil-urshula-kelloakizilian. He was Urshula, the black wyrm of Vaasa, the Beast of the Bog, the bane of all who thought to civilize this untamable land. He had razed entire villages in his youth. He had decimated towns so completely that those who subsequently returned to the scene could not know that structures had once stood there. Tribes of goblins had paid homage to him, sacrificed to him, and carried his likeness on totems.

In his youth, those centuries before, Urshula had dominated the region from the Galena Mountains in the south and running up the eastern border to the base of the Great Glacier that described Vaasa's northern edge.

But he had grown quieter. Age had brought contentment and piles of treasure whose smell and taste—and magical energy—provided an irresistible bed for Urshula. Rarely did the dragon come forth from the soft peat and cool stones of his subterranean lair.

Every now and then, though, the smell of fresh meat, of dwarf, human, orc, or even the occasional elf, drifted down to him, and when it was accompanied by the hum of magic and the metallic taste of coins, Urshula roused.

He sat before his conquest, the dwarves all slaughtered and devoured. His forelegs, so deadly and delicate all at once, picked through the treasures as he mused whether he liked the taste of dwarf raw, as with the first kill by the lake, or acid-bathed, as with the pair to the side. A great forked tongue slipped through his fangs as he considered his options, seeking remnants of one or the other morsel to better help with his internal debate.

He soon had all of the treasure worth pilfering in a single sack. He clutched it in one claw and turned his senses to the south, from whence drifted the pungent smell of orc. Urshula wasn't really hungry any more, and the thought of sleep was inviting, but he spread his great leathery wings and lifted up high on his hind legs, his serpentine neck craning to afford him a view far to the south.

The dragon's eyes narrowed as he considered the plumes of smoke rising from the distant city. He had known of the settlement, of

course, for he had heard the ruckus of its initial construction, but he had never given it much heed. The smell of orc was strong, but they were not known to be rich in either magic or coin.

The dragon looked back to the pond and considered the tunnels beneath the dark waters that would take him home. He looked back to the south and flexed his wings yet again.

Still clutching the sack, Urshula leaped into the air. Great wings rolled parallel to the ground, bent slightly, and caught the air beneath them, driving the wyrm higher. From fifty feet up he saw the city and was surprised at the size of it. Thousands of people lived there, or so it seemed, for its walls ran wide and far to the south. Scores of structures dotted the interior, some of them extensive and multi-storied.

A wave of hatred rankled the beast, and Urshula almost gave in to it and dived headlong for that intrusion. How dare they build such a place upon his land!

But then he heard the horns blowing and saw the black specks—the guards of the distant city—scrambling along the walls.

Urshula had gone against a city—not a town, but an organized and defended city—only once before. One wing, his rear right leg, and his lower torso still ached with the memory of stinging pain.

Still, these intruders could not go unpunished.

Urshula climbed higher into the darkening sky. He let forth a roar, for he wanted terror to precede his attack.

He leveled off once he passed above the clouds, and he could imagine the poor fools along the city's wall scanning the skies in desperation.

He drifted south for a short while, then he dived, a power swoop that shot him out from the cloud cover at full speed, the wind shrieking over his extended wings. He heard the screams. He saw the scrambling. He smelled the tiny arrows reaching up to him.

He crossed over and strafed with his acidic breath, drawing a line of devastation down the center of the city. A few of the arrows nipped at him. One spear lifted up high enough for Urshula to bite it out of the sky.

And he was gone, out over the city's southern wall. A slight tilt of his wings angled the dragon to climb into the air once again.

The dragon knew they'd be better prepared for his second run, but there would be no second run. Urshula rose up even higher. He banked back to the north and flew over the city from on high, well out of reach of the puny arrows.

He glided down, swooping past the remains of the dwarf camp, then dipped and plowed into the lake, lifting a wall of water high into the air.

Wings tucked back as he descended, the dragon's great body swayed to push him through the cold current of the underground river that brought water from the spring melt at the Great Glacier. Urshula would never run out of breath, though, for black dragons were perfectly adapted to such an environment. Some minutes later, the dragon turned into a side passage, a lava tube from an ancient volcano that gradually climbed so that, after a long while, he came free of the water.

He followed his subterranean network of trails unerringly, traversing corridors so wide that he could occasionally flex his wings, and so narrow that his scales scraped the worms and roots as he snaked his way through. In one of those narrow corridors, Urshula paused and sniffed. He nodded, knowing that he was parallel to his lair.

He turned his head into the soft ground and brought forth his acidic breath but sprayed it gradually, melting and loosening the dirt before him as he bored through.

He broke into the southern rim of the side room of his lair, crawled forth, and shook the peat and dirt from his interlocking scales. He stopped and snapped his long, thick tail against the wall of dirt, collapsing the tunnel behind him, and issued a growl that sounded almost like a cat's purr. His lamplight gaze fell over his bed of coins and gems, suits of armor and weapons. He flung his newest sack of treasure atop the pile and slithered forth.

He collapsed in pleasant thoughts of devastation and considered again the taste of dwarf, raw and cooked. His tongue snaked between his great fangs, seeking morsels and sweet memories.

Then the dragon's lamplight eyes closed, the lair fell into pitch blackness, and Kazmil-urshula-kelloakizilian, the Beast of the Bog, slept.

⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔ ⚔

"Minor damage from a meager wyrm," said Byphast the Frozen Death. She appeared in all ways an elf, except that her hair shone silver rather than the usual golden or black, and her skin was a bit too white. Her eyes, too, did not fit the overall image, for they showed a cool shade of yellow, with a line of black centering them, like the eyes of a hunting serpent. "Palishchuk shows the scars you predicted, several years old, but they are of little consequence."

In the room was one other, seated at a small table before a trio of large bookcases, who slowly swiveled his head Byphast's way. The fabric of his gray cloak was torn in strips to reveal the velvety blackness of the robe beneath. His voluminous sleeves hung below the edge of the table, but when the man turned, his fingers showed.

Fingers of bone. A living skeleton.

Beneath the great hood of the robe, there was only blackness, and Byphast was glad for that.

Her relief did not hold, though, as Zhengyi lifted one of his skeletal hands and drew the hood back. The gray and white skull came into view. The pieces of rotting flesh and the inhuman, unearthly eyes—points of red and yellow fire—forced Byphast to glance away. And the smell, the essence of death itself, nearly backed her out of the room.

Zhengyi pulled the hood back all the way to reveal the splotches of his white hair, clumped at all angles across his bony pate. If most people coifed themselves to appear more attractive, it seemed quite apparent that Zhengyi did the opposite.

For as most people, as most creatures, reveled in life, so did Zhengyi revel in death. He had passed beyond his human form into a state of undeath. Of the many variants among the walking dead on Toril, none was more abhorrent and revolting than a lich. A vampire might charm, might even be beautiful, but a lich was not a creature of subtlety. A lich didn't enter a bargain with Death, as did a

vampire. A lich wasn't an unwilling participant in the state of undeath, as were the minor skeletons, zombies, and ghouls. A lich was a purposeful creature, a wizard who by powerful enchantments and sheer force of will had defeated Death itself, had refused to surrender consciousness and self-awareness or to give in to some otherworldly, godly being.

Even Byphast the Frozen Death, the greatest white dragon of the Great Glacier, shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot in the presence of Zhengyi. She wished the corridors of Castle Perilous were wider and higher so that she might face Zhengyi in her awe-inspiring dragon form.

Realistically, though, Byphast didn't believe the lich would be impressed by even that. Certainly Zhengyi had shown no fear when he'd traversed the icy corridors of Byphast's lair to confront her in her very treasure room. He had passed through the remorhaz pit, where several of the mighty polar worms, minions of the white dragon, stood guard. He had so dominated the ice trolls Byphast used as sentries that they hadn't even warned their dragon deity of Zhengyi's approach.

"Tell me, Byphast, what lingering damage might your own deadly breath have caused to the stone of Palishchuk?" the lich replied at last.

Byphast's reptilian eyes narrowed. Her breath was frost, of course, powerful enough to freeze solid the flesh and blood of living enemies but largely ineffective against stone.

Or against a lich.

"A black dragon's spittle is concentrated," Byphast replied, her teeth gritted. She felt the twinges of anger ripple through her elf form, screaming at her to revert to her natural state. "Blacks can wreak devastation indeed, but in a smaller area. The breath of a white dragon fans wider and is deadly even at the fringes. And more effective. I can kill all within without destroying the city itself. The people die, the buildings remain. Which is the wiser choice, Witch-King?"

"You know I favor you," Zhengyi replied, the meager flaps of dried skin at the corners of his mouth somehow turning up in a frozen

smile.

Byphast hid her disgust. “And I am possessed of potent spells, beyond the abilities of Urshula the Black, I am sure.”

“You would not wish him as an ally?”

Byphast leaned back at that, her surprise showing.

“He came forth a few years ago,” Zhengyi went on, letting the question drop. “That is good. He is below that pond north of the city —of that, I am certain.”

“When Zhengyi wishes to find a dragon …” Byphast muttered.

“I will conquer Damara, my friend. The spoils will be grand, and my dragon allies will be well rewarded.”

Byphast’s eyes narrowed again, and with the gleam of eagerness glowing behind them.

“Do you not think Urshula worthy of our war?” asked the lich.

“Urshula is the father of all the black dragons in the Bloodstone Lands,” Byphast replied. “Enlist him and you are assured a flight of blacks at your service. They are most effective at weakening a castle’s walls before your ground fodder advances.”

“Oh, I will enlist him,” Zhengyi promised. “Remember, I have the greatest treasure of all.”

Byphast’s eyes flared and narrowed yet again.

He did indeed.

“Urshula is not possessed of a magical repertoire?” Zhengyi asked. He tapped a skeletal finger to the bone where his lip used to be and turned back to his small desk and the crystal ball that sat atop it.

“He is a black.”

“And you are a white,” Zhengyi replied, glancing back. “When first I learned of Byphast, I asked the same question of Honoringast the Red.”

Byphast’s eyes narrowed at the mention of the domineering red dragon, the greatest of Zhengyi’s allies. Few creatures in all the world disgusted Byphast as thoroughly as did a red dragon, but she was not fool enough to test her strength and cunning against Honoringast, who was mighty even measured against his red-scaled kin. And red dragons were the most formidable of all, save the thankfully elusive, rare, and haughty golds.

“ ‘She is a white,’ was his answer, in a tone no less dismissive than your own,” Zhengyi continued. “And yet, to my great pleasure and greater gain, I later learned that you were quite skilled in the Art.”

“In all the centuries, I have not heard of Urshula ever using a spell of any consequence,” Byphast replied. “I have encountered him only once, at the base of the Great Glacier, and as we had both just finished devouring respective camps of fodder, we did not engage.”

“You feared him?”

“Even the weakest of dragons is capable of inflicting great damage, Witch-King. It is a truism you would do well to remember.”

Zhengyi’s laugh sounded more as a wheeze.

“Shall I accompany you to visit Urshula?” Byphast asked as the Witch-King sat down facing the crystal ball and shrugged his cloak from his shoulders. Byphast wasn’t quite sure of why he was doing that. It was her understanding that they were to travel to Urshula’s lair straight away. “Or are you summoning Honoringast? Surely your arrival with a red and white at your side will intimidate Urshula more fully.”

“I’ll not need Honoringast, nor even Byphast,” Zhengyi explained. “If Urshula is not wise enough to understand the power of spellcasting, it would not be wise to venture into his lair.”

“If he has no spells then he is not as formidable as I,” Byphast growled.

“True, but did you not just warn me about the weakest of dragons?”

“Yet you did not fear me?”

Zhengyi looked over at her, and she realized how ridiculous she must have seemed at that moment with her arms crossed over her chest.

“I did not fear you because I knew that you would understand the value of that which I had to offer,” the lich explained. “Byphast, wise enough to engage in spells of mighty magic, was of course wise enough to recognize the greatest treasure of all. And even if you had refused my offer, you would not have been fool enough to challenge my power in that place and at that time.”

“You presumed much.”

“The Art requires discipline. If Urshula has not that discipline, then better that I approach him in a manner where his impetuousness can do no damage.”

Zhengyi leaned over the table and peered into the crystal ball. He waved one hand over it, and a bluish-gray mist appeared inside, swirling and roiling. A moment later, the Witch-King nodded and slid his chair back. He stood up, reached into a pocket of his robe, and produced a small amethyst jewel, shaped in the form of a dragon’s skull.

Byphast sucked in her breath; she knew a similar gemstone quite well.

“You have located Urshula?”

“Precisely where I said he would be,” Zhengyi answered. “In a lair in the peat to the side of the vernal pool.”

“You will go to him without me?”

“Pray watch,” Zhengyi answered. “You may be there in spirit, at least.”

As he finished, he began waving his arms slowly before him, the wide sleeves of his robes rolling hypnotically like a pair of swaying, hooded snakes. He spoke a chant, intoning the verbal components of a spell.

Byphast knew the spell, and she watched with interest as Zhengyi began to transform. Skin grew over the bones of his fingers and face. Hair sprouted from all the bare patches on his skull, and it was not white like the clumps that already adorned his head but rich brown in hue. The white hair, too, began to darken. The robes expanded as Zhengyi grew to considerable girth, and his white grin disappeared beneath full, red lips.

He appeared as he had been in life, robust and rotund. A dark beard sprouted from his chin and jowls.

“Less of a shock, you think?” he asked.

“Urshula would try to eat either form, I am sure.”

Zhengyi’s laugh sounded as different from his previous wheeze as his round, fleshy form appeared different from his skeletal body. The chuckle rose up from a jiggling belly and resonated deeply in the man’s thick throat.

“Shouldn’t you have waited until you were near to the lair?” asked the dragon.

“Near? Why I am practically inside even as we speak!”

Byphast moved up beside him as he turned to the crystal ball and began casting another spell. Looking into the ball, the dragon could see Urshula, the Beast of the Bog, curled up in his subterranean lair on a pile of treasure. She couldn’t tell if it was a trick of the ball illuminating the stone and dirt walls of the chamber, or if there was some glowing lichen or other light source actually inside Urshula’s home.

But it did not matter, for Byphast knew that it was no illusion. The image in the scrying ball was indeed that of Urshula and was real in time and space. Byphast turned back to regard Zhengyi just as he completed his casting.

His large body glowed for just a heartbeat then the glow broke free of his form and came forward, a translucent, glowing likeness of the man who stood behind it. It shrunk as if it had traveled a great distance away, reaching out toward the crystal ball, then disappeared inside the glass.

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Urshula opened one sleepy eye, and his lamplight gaze illuminated a conical area before him. Like a spotlight, his roving eye probed the cavern. Gemstones glittered and gold gleamed as his eye’s beam slipped through the shadows. The dragon’s second eye popped open, and his great head snapped up when his gaze settled on a portly, bearded man, standing at ease in black velvet robes.

“Greetings, mighty Urshula,” the man said.

Urshula spat at him, and the floor around the man bubbled and popped. A pile of gold melted into a single lump, and a suit of plate mail armor showed its limitations, its breastplate disintegrating under the acid breath of the black dragon.

“Impressive,” the man said, glancing around him. He was unharmed, untouched, as if the acid had gone right through him.

Urshula narrowed his reptilian eyes and scrutinized the man—the *image* of a man—more closely. The dragon sensed the magic finally,

and a low growl escaped through his long fangs.

“I have not come to steal from you, mighty Urshula. Nor to attack you in any way. Perhaps you have heard of me. I am Zhengyi, the Witch-King of Vaasa.”

The tone in his voice told the dragon that the little man thought quite highly of himself. That made one of them.

“Ah, I see,” the man went on. “My claim of kingship means little to you, no doubt, for you perceive me as one who holds claim over humans alone. Or perhaps over humans, elves, dwarves, orcs, goblins, and all the rest of the humanoid races in which you have little interest, other than to make a meal of them now and again.”

The dragon increased the volume of his growl.

“But you should take note this time, Urshula, for my rise holds great implications for all who call Vaasa, or anywhere in the Bloodstone Lands, their home. I have united all the creatures of Vaasa to do battle with the feeble and foolish lords of Damara. My armies swarm south through the Galenas, and soon all the land will be mine.”

“All the creatures?” Urshula replied in a voice that was both hissing and gravelly at the same time.

“For the most part.”

The dragon growled.

“I am no fool,” said Zhengyi. “Naturally I did not approach one as magnificent as you until I was certain that my plans would proceed. I would not enlist Urshula, the Beast of the Bog, to fight the initial battles, for I would not be worthy of such a creature as Urshula until the first victories were achieved.”

“You are a fool if you think yourself worthy even then.”

“Others do not agree.”

“Others? Goblins and dwarves?” The dragon snorted, little puffs of black smoke popping out of his upward-facing nostrils.

“You have heard of Byphast the Frozen Death?” Zhengyi asked. The dragon’s nostrils flared, and his eyes widened. “Or of Honoringast the Red?”

Urshula’s head moved back at the mention of that one. The black dragon, suddenly not so sure of himself, glanced around.

“Am I now worthy?” Zhengyi asked.

Urshula lifted up to his haunches. The movement, frighteningly fast and graceful for so large a beast, had Zhengyi stepping backward despite the fact that he was just a projected image, his physical form far from the breath and bite of the black wyrm.

“If you are worthy, then you are worthy of naught but the title of fool, and no more, to disturb the rest of Urshula!” the dragon roared. “You have found my home and think yourself clever, but beware, ‘Witch-King,’ for none who know the home of Urshula shall live for long.”

The thunder of his roaring was still reverberating off the cavern’s walls when the dragon came forward. His jaws opened wide and dropped over the projected image of Zhengyi. The great dragon’s teeth clamped together hard and loud right where the lich’s knees appeared. Urshula bit only insubstantial air, of course, for Zhengyi wasn’t truly in the cavern, but the dragon thrashed and flailed anyway, its forelegs slapping down at that which its mouth had not bitten. And when those clawed dragon fingers passed through the insubstantial Zhengyi and slapped at the floor, Urshula flexed his great muscles and drove his iron-strong claws into the stone, raking them across, digging deep ridges.

The dragon finished by spreading wide his wings and crouching upright on his rear legs, his lamplight gaze fixed on the continuing image of the Witch-King.

“The other notable dragons of the region have joined with me,” Zhengyi went on, unperturbed and apparently unimpressed. “They recognize the value and the gain of this winning campaign. When all of the Bloodstone Lands are under my command, they will be well rewarded.”

“Urshula does not need others to reward him,” the dragon countered. “Urshula takes what Urshula wants.”

“They find security in my ranks, mighty dragon.”

“Urshula kills whoever threatens Urshula.”

“You are aware of the young lord gaining strength in the southland?” Zhengyi asked. “You have heard of Gareth?”

The dragon snorted.

“You know his surname, of course?”

“You have confused me with someone who would care, it seems.”

“ ‘Dragonsbane,’ ” Zhengyi replied. “The young leader of those who oppose me holds the surname of Dragonsbane, and it was one earned through deeds in his rich family lines. Would he be a friend to Urshula if he somehow managed to defeat me?”

“You just claimed to lead a winning campaign,” the dragon reminded him.

“Indeed, and that is in no small part because of the wisdom of Byphast, Honoringast, and others who see the choice clearly.”

“Then why have you disturbed my slumber? Go and win, but leave Urshula be. And consider yourself fortunate in that, for few ever leave Urshula except scattered in piles of excrement.”

“Magnanimity?” Zhengyi asked as much as stated. “I offer to the dragons rewards for their assistance. I would be remiss if I did not extend the courtesy to Kazmil-urshula-kelloakizilian.”

The dragon chuckled, a sound like stones being crushed by boulders in a pool of acid, and said, “You see yourself as salvation, then, as a soon-to-be-king of all you survey. I have outlived many such fools. You see yourself as one of note, but I see a pathetic human, and a dead one at that, wearing but the guise of life. Lay down, lich. Seek your kingdom and peace in a world more befitting your rotting corporeal form. Bother me no more, or I will lay you down myself.

“And if you do come against me, with or without your dragon companions,” Urshula went on, “then do inform Byphast the Frozen Death that she will be the first to feel the bite of my wrath.”

“You have not yet heard my offer, grand beast,” Zhengyi said. He brought forth a small gem shaped like a dragon’s skull. “The greatest treasure of all. Do you recognize this, Urshula?”

The dragon narrowed his eyes and issued a low growl but did not respond.

“A phylactery,” Zhengyi explained. “Prepared for Urshula. I have beaten Death, mighty dragon. And I know how you might—”

“Be gone from here, abomination!” the dragon roared. “You have embraced death, not defeated it, and you only did so because you

are of the inferior race, the short-lived and infirm. You presume the death of Urshula, but Urshula is older than the oldest memories of your race. And Urshula will remain when the memory of you has faded from all the world!"

The image closed its hand and slid the phylactery away. "You do not appreciate its value," Zhengyi said, then he shrugged and bowed. "Sleep well, mighty dragon. You are as impressive as I was told you would be. Perhaps another day…."

"I will never see you again, else I will see you destroyed."

Urshula's words echoed and rebounded, and it seemed as if their vibrations shook the image of Zhengyi to nothingness.

The black dragon remained crouching for some time, still as a statue, listening for any indication that Zhengyi or his minions were within the chamber or the corridors beyond.

Many hours later, the great black curled back up to sleep.

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The Witch-King stood on a high, flat stone, looking north to his kingdom of Vaasa, his skeletal fingers balled into fists of rage at his sides.

The campaign had been going well He had pressed deep into Damara, conquering enemies and enlisting new allies—many of them the rotting corpses of the men his army had just slaughtered. His enemies remained divided, often too concerned with one another to pay sufficient heed to the true darkness that had come to their land.

Gareth Dragonsbane and his friends worked furiously to remedy that, to unite Damara's many lords under a single banner and stand strong against Zhengyi, but they had acted too late, so Zhengyi believed, and his victory seemed assured.

But then a small but powerful force had swept into Vaasa in his own army's wake. They had broken the siege at Palishchuk and gathered the remnants of refugees from across the wasteland into a single, formidable force. Several caravans of supplies from Castle Perilous had not reached Bloodstone Pass in the Galenas. Zhengyi's main supply route had been interrupted.

The Witch-King understood that he should not be looking north at so critical an hour. He had not the time to chase a splinter group of rebels with Gareth Dragonsbane rising to prominence before him.

"Where are you, Byphast?" he asked the cold northern breeze.

He had sent the dragon back to her glacial home with instructions to put down the rebels and their Damaran supporters, but the news coming back to him had been less than promising.

He stood there a while longer, then snapped his black robes and gray cape around him in a swift, angry turn. He strode back down the mountainside, his undead form easily gliding over the treacherous descent, and soon he walked among the rear guard of his army again, appearing once more as he had in life. The living humans who slavishly followed him would not have suffered the terrible sight of his true form.

He waited out the night in his command tent, perusing the reports and maps that were coming in from the battle fronts in the south. Truly Zhengyi's preparation for the campaign would have garnered the appreciation of the greatest generals throughout Faerûn. Information was power, Zhengyi knew, and his command tent, with its tables full of maps and miniatures of various strategic stretches of the Bloodstone Lands' terrain, and markers depicting the relative size and strength of the armies doing battle, was a testament to that knowledge. There, Zhengyi could plot his army's movements, his defensive positions, and those areas most vulnerable to attack. In that tent, the grand strategy—including the decision not to throw his weight fully against Palishchuk—had been formulated and continually refined.

The Witch-King didn't like surprises.

Despite his preparation and confidence, Zhengyi's firelight eyes often glanced back over his shoulder, to the north, in the hope of word from the white dragon. Splinter groups of powerful heroes were harder to keep track of and often more trouble than regiments of common soldiers.

The long night passed without incident. It wasn't until the next morning that Byphast, in her elf form, came walking down the trail. Zhengyi spotted her some distance off, and first sight told him that

the news from the north was not good. Byphast limped, and even from a distance, she appeared more disheveled than Zhengyi had ever seen her.

The Witch-King's robes fluttered out behind him as he strode through his camp, determined to meet the white dragon on the trail beyond the hearing of his guards and soldiers.

"The rumors are true," Zhengyi said as he approached. "A band of heroes reached Palishchuk."

"To the cheers of the half-orcs," Byphast replied. "That city is more fortified than ever. Their preparations do not cease. They have thickened their walls and set out crates of stinging arrows."

Her use of that particular adjective told Zhengyi that the dragon had personally tested those defenses.

"And they have constructed greater engines of defense, catapults and ballistae that can be quickly swiveled toward the sky to strike back against airborne creatures. When I flew over the city, barbed chains rose to impede me, and I only narrowly avoided giant spears hurled my way."

"Palishchuk will be dealt with in time," Zhengyi promised.

"Without the aid of Byphast, and without any other dragons, I would guess," the white dragon replied. "The treasures of Palishchuk are not worth the risk to wing and limb."

Zhengyi nodded, still not overly concerned with the half-orc city. Once Damara had been conquered, Palishchuk would become a tiny oasis of resistance with no help forthcoming from anywhere in the Bloodstone Lands. They would not hold out for long, and Zhengyi had not yet given up hope that the half-orcs would ultimately throw in with him. They were half-orcs, after all, and would not likely be as deterred by moral issues as were the weak humans, halflings, and others of Damara.

"These heroes hid within the city?" Zhengyi asked, getting back to the problem at hand.

"Nay, they came forth quite willingly. When I escaped the chains and the spears and flew off to the north, they burst out of Palishchuk's gate in pursuit."

"And you killed them?"

Byphast's twisted expression gave him the answer before the dragon began to speak. "They are accompanied by mighty wizards and priests. Their knights glow with wards to defeat my deadly breath; their armor sings with magic to deter the rake of my claws."

"A small band?"

"Fifty strong and well designed to do battle with dragons."

"Byphast would not normally flee from such a group." Zhengyi did nothing to keep the contempt out of his voice, nor from his expression, as he narrowed his eyes and sneered.

"If forced to do battle with them—if ever they happened upon my lair—then I would surely destroy them," the dragon replied without hesitation. "But scars would accompany that win, I am sure, and in that place, at this time, they were not worth the trouble."

"You serve Zhengyi." Even as the Witch-King took the conversation in that direction, Byphast's statement, if ever they happened upon my lair, resonated in his thoughts.

"I agreed to fight beside Zhengyi's forces," the dragon replied. "I did not agree to wage such battles alone in the bogs of Vaasa."

Zhengyi produced a phylactery, the one to which Byphast had attuned herself. If the dragon was slain, her energy and life-force would transfer to the phylactery, and she would become undead, a dracolich.

"You forget?" the lich said.

"It is a final safeguard, but not one I am anxious to use. If in the course of events I am slain, then so be it. That is the risk my kind need take whenever we come forth into the world of lesser creatures. But I'll not chase after the undeath you offer."

"Ah, Byphast, it is a piteous thing to see a creature of your reputation reduced to such fear."

Lizardlike eyes narrowed, and a low growl escaped the dragon's elf lips.

"Very well, then," said Zhengyi. "I will deal with the intruders myself. I'll not have them nipping at my heels all the way through Damara. Go and rejoin the commanders at the front. Lay waste to the foolish Damarans who stand in our way."

Byphast didn't move, nor did her expression change from the hateful look she shot Zhengyi's way.

If that threat bothered the Witch-King at all, though, he didn't show it. He turned his back on the wyrm in elf's clothing and stalked back to his vast encampment.



"Donegan!" cried Maryin Felspur, Knight of the Order.

"*Sir* Donegan," the senior knight corrected. He walked his armor-clad horse out from the ranks, the heavy hooves making plopping sounds as the fifteen-hundred-pound steed, with three hundred pounds of armor and two hundred pounds of rider, crossed the soft, wet ground. Donegan paced right up to Maryin, the only female knight of the ten who had come out from Lord Gareth's ranks in Damara, accompanying more than fifty footsoldiers, half a dozen priests, and a trio of annoying wizards.

"Sir Donegan," Maryin corrected herself with outward humility.

She didn't have her helmet on, though, and her smile betrayed her tone. Serving as scout for the group, the lithe Maryin was the least armored of the knights, and her horse, a fine, strong young pinto, barely larger than a pony, wore only protective breast- and faceplates. Maryin preferred the bow and used her speed to skirt the edges of the encounters with Zhengyi's minions, thinning their ranks at advantageous points so that Donegan and Sir Bevell could best exploit their enemies.

Donegan did not dismount. His mail of interlocking plates made such movements tedious, particularly in trying to get back up onto the nearly eighteen-hand charger. Instead he leaned over as far as his encumbering suit would allow and lifted the visor of his helmet.

Maryin crouched beside a depression, a tear in the ground that was half-filled with brown water.

"Only a creature the size of a dragon could make such an imprint," Maryin said.

Donegan straightened and scanned the area. He noted a second and third imprint behind and several more ahead but beyond that, nothing.

“Master Fisticus,” he called to the leader of the trio of wizards, “pray you and your companions ready your components and our shielding spells. These tracks are not old, and it would appear that the wyrm has taken to the air. It could swoop upon us from on high at any time, and I’ll not have its deadly breath decimating our ranks before we’ve had a chance to engage the beast.”

“Perhaps we should slide back toward Palishchuk, my lord,” Maryin offered quietly. “In reach of their ballistae—”

“Nay,” Sir Donegan began before Maryin had even finished. “The wyrm is too smart to be goaded near the town again. The half-orcs nearly brought it down the first time.”

“If it is the same dragon.”

That thought gave Donegan pause, for he could not dismiss the reasoning. Until a few months ago, Donegan had seen only one dragon in all of his twenty years of adventuring, and that was a small white up near the Great Glacier. With the coming of Zhengyi, the Knight of the Order had learned far more than ever he had intended regarding dragonkind, for evil chromatic wyrms of many colors filled the sky above the Witch-King’s advance. Reds and whites had laid waste to many villages, including Donegan’s home town, and the knight had done battle with a pair of blues, an encounter that had cost him a horse and had left a blackened line of lightning scarring across the back of his otherwise silvery armor.

Too many dragons, Donegan thought. Far too many dragons….

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Zhengyi stood on the northeastern bank of a small pond a few miles to the north of Palishchuk. Gone were the human trappings of his former self; he saw no need for such vanities out there, alone. He had his hood back, revealing his skull, the splotchy patches of hair, and the flaps of rotting skin. His robes smelled of mildew, hanging in tatters and showing green spots of mold. He clutched a twisted oaken staff, leaning on it heavily, and stared out to the south.

He saw their approach, the glint of the sun off their lance tips, off the armor of their mounts. He heard the thunder of hooves and marching soldiers.

The remnants of the Witch-King's lips curled in a wicked smile. He thought of Byphast's declaration: that she would not go against such a contingent except in her lair.

Any dragon would fight against any odds to protect its lair. To the death.

More flashes showed in the south. They followed the trail Zhengyi had dug with his magic, thinking it the tracks of a dragon.

He lifted his twisted oaken staff again, located a suitable spot, and uttered a command word. The ground erupted where he'd pointed his staff. Clumps of dirt flew into the air. The magic dug at the soft ground, bursts of energy tore up and threw aside yards of ground as efficiently and powerfully as a dragon's talons might.

Zhengyi glanced southeast, to the distant troop of warriors. Perhaps they had noted the disturbance, perhaps not. They would be there soon enough, in any case. His spell completed, the deep hole dug, Zhengyi stepped into the water. It did not feel cold to the Witch-King, of course, for he could no longer experience any such sensations. In any case, no chill was more profound than the icy embrace of death.

His robes floated out behind him as he stepped in deeper, and soon he was under the water, not breathing, not moving. As the surface stilled, Zhengyi's otherworldly eyes peered through the film to the northeastern bank. His trail would take them to the dig.

He clutched his staff more tightly, preparing the next spell.

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Maryin crept along the muddy ground, staying low and letting her elven cloak, a garment of magical camouflage, hang down around her. She had left her horse back with Donegan and the others, who marched along some hundred feet behind her. Maryin's job was to detect any potential ambushes, and to keep them moving toward the dragon. Given the dirt flying high into the air a few moments earlier, the knight had every reason to believe she had completed that task.

She had found another few tracks not far back, for the beast had apparently set down, but then she came upon a great hole, not far

from the bank of a small pond. She crouched at the rim, considering the tunnel at the bottom.

“Did you go to ground, wyrm?” she whispered under her breath.

Maryin lingered for a few moments, then, hearing the approach of her companions, she straightened, glanced around, and moved her hand out from under the protection of her cloak, raising her fist high into the air.

She glanced at the water, not realizing that the eyes of the Witch-King looked back at her. Behind her, Sir Donegan slowed his contingent and approached with some caution. He walked his horse up beside the knight scout.

“Into the tunnel?” he asked, inspecting the hole. “Or is it a ruse, and the beast has gone under the pond?”

Maryin pulled back her cowl and shrugged. “I’m finding nothing to say it is and nothing to say it isn’t.”

“A wonderful scout you are.”

Maryin smiled at him. “I can track almost anything, and you know it well—even that little lass who thought to sneak into your room. But you cannot expect me to track a dragon that keeps taking to the sky. Do you think its beating wings will flatten grass from on high? Do you think the beast will cut a wake through the land as a boat might do across a lake?”

Sir Donegan laughed at her endless sarcasm and the wicked little jab against him. He still had a bone to pick with Maryin over that wench incident, for Donegan had been anticipating the visit, and the interception had not been appreciated. But that was a fight for another day, and a thought came to him.

“Has the water risen?”

Maryin looked at him, curious, then caught on and moved to the pond’s bank where she began inspecting for signs of a recent swell. The pond wasn’t very large, after all, and surely the displacement would be noticeable in the event a creature as large as a dragon had entered its depths.

A moment later, Maryin stood straight again and shook her head.

“And so the wyrm did not enter the pond,” Donegan said with a sigh. “Good enough, then.”

“There are no tracks from the hole to the water, and if the beast had taken to the air for any distance, we should have seen it—or should have heard the splash when it dived in. My guess is that the dragon, confident and oblivious to our pursuit, took to the tun—”

She hunched forward, and Donegan leaped back. Behind them, horses and soldiers bristled. From the hole came a low, throaty growl, a resonating rumble befitting a beast of a dragon’s stature.

“Form up!” Sir Donegan commanded.

He turned his charger and thundered back to the ranks. Maryin pulled her cowl back over her head and face and appeared to melt into the shadows at the pool’s edge.

The growl continued for a few moments, then gradually receded.

Lances were lowered, swords were drawn, and wizards and priests prepared their spells.

Then it was quiet once more. And through the long hush, no great monster sprang from the hole.

When Donegan and the others finally dared to approach, they stood on the edge of the deep, wide, funnel-shaped pit, looking to the broad tunnel at its base, which ran off both east and west.

“It would seem that we have found our wyrm,” Sir Donegan told his troop.

“Are we certain that a dragon dug this pit?” another knight asked.

“There are spells that can facilitate such things,” Fisticus the wizard replied. “As there are beasts….”

“A dragon?”

“There is little turmoil a dragon cannot create,” Fisticus explained. “Such a wyrm as the one that attacked Palishchuk those days ago would have little trouble boring through the soft ground of the Vaasan summer.”

Sir Gavaland, another Knight of the Order, said, “One would think that if the dragon meant to announce its presence in such a manner, it would have burst forth to attack us in that moment of surprise.”

“If it knew we were here,” Donegan replied.

“The growl?”

“A purr of satisfaction before settling down to sleep?” the wizard offered. “Such beasts are known to growl as often as a man might

sigh or yawn."

"Pray it is a yawn, then," said Donegan, "and one announcing that the beast is ready for a long and sound nap." He looked around at his soldiers, grinning from ear to ear beneath his upraised visor. "One from which it will never awaken."

That brought a host of nods and grins from the rank and file.

Off to the side, Maryin neither nodded nor grinned. She knew what was coming, and what her role would be, before Sir Donegan even motioned to her to enter the pit. It occurred to her that perhaps she would do well to don her heavier plate mail and hire an elf to handle the scouting.

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Under the water, Zhengyi nodded with contentment as he watched the troop disappear over the pit's rim. His spell mimicking the dragon's roar had been well placed through use of his complimentary enchantment of ventriloquism, or so it would seem.

The Witch-King knew that he should be away at once—back to the south and Damara, where the battle raged—but he lingered a bit longer in the pond, and when all of the soldiers had gone into the pit save those few left to guard the horses, he emerged again on the northeastern bank.

The three fools standing with the horses still stared at the pit, oblivious to the danger, when the Witch-King came calling.

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She knew that her elven cloak could protect her from prying eyes, but still Maryin felt vulnerable as she edged her way down the enormous tunnel—certainly high and wide enough for a dragon to charge through it. Lichen covered the walls, emitting a soft light, like starlight in a forest clearing. Though thankful for that illumination—for it meant she had to carry no torch—at the same time she feared the glow might make her just as plain to the wyrm's clever eyes.

She felt the beast's presence before she smelled or heard it—a pervasive aura of fear hung in the air.

Maryin went down to all fours and crawled along. No retreat would be fast enough if the beast spotted her, so her only hope lay in not being detected at all.

She rounded a bend and held her breath as she peered into a distant chamber. There it was, and it was not the beast that had recently attacked Palishchuk. For even in the dim light, she could see that its scales glistened black, and not white.

She retreated slowly for some time, inching out backward. Then she turned and ran, two hundred yards or more up the tunnel, to where Donegan and the others waited, including the armored horses of the knights Donegan and Bevell.

“A large black,” she explained in as soft a voice as possible while she drew the chamber’s layout for them in a patch of soft dirt.

Fisticus and the other wizards went to work, coordinating the spells they would need to fend off the acidic breath of a black dragon.

“A white would present fewer challenges,” the lead wizard complained. “Our spells to defeat its freezing breath are more specialized and complete.”

“Perhaps I can borrow some fence paint and change the beast’s color while it sleeps,” came Maryin’s sarcastic reply.

“That would be helpful,” Fisticus shot back without hesitation.

“Enough,” Donegan scolded them both. “Black dragons are comparable to whites—at least it’s not an ancient red awaiting us.”

“We have spells specifically to defeat the fiery breath of a—” Fisticus began.

“And any red worth its scales would have mighty spells to dwarf your own,” Donegan interrupted. “In this case we need only defeat the black’s initial spray and get our forces in close. Once by its side, we will take the beast down quickly.”

Fisticus nodded and moved to stand next to Maryin’s map. “The distance from the tunnel to the beast?” he asked. “And where in the approach are we likely to be engaged?”



Getting into the heart of the dragon's lair was little challenge for the Witch-King. In his two-dimensional shadow form, Zhengyi merely slipped into a crack in the stone and slithered his way down. Now he stood off to the side of the main floor, not far from Urshula but concealed by the nature of his form and by enchantments so that the dragon did not sense him.

He watched with great amusement as the stealthy female knight crept back down again to observe the dragon. A pair of wizards followed, magically shielded and hidden.

"Pathetic," Zhengyi mouthed under his breath.

He raised his bony hand and added an illusion—from the dragon's perspective—to further hide the intruders, for he did not want Urshula to detect the approaching force too soon.

The wizards cast their spell and hustled away, and as he considered their creation, Zhengyi had to admit their cleverness. Nodding, he knew what was coming next. He waved his hand again, and his illusion disappeared.

Urshula's eye opened just a bit. Zhengyi watched the muscles along the dragon's great forelegs tighten with readiness. Down the tunnel came the warriors in a sudden charge, weapons and armor clattering.

Urshula sprang into a crouch, his great horned head swiveling in line.

Zhengyi marveled that the soldiers did not break ranks. Not one of them fled from the sight of a great dragon. Glad he was that he had come back to the dragon's lair, for the fortitude of the troop of knights could not be underestimated.

Urshula crouched back, and Zhengyi felt the beast's rumbling inhalation, the preparation for its first devastating strike. The warriors did not slow, approaching the place where the wizards had set their enchantment. Urshula's neck shot forward, his jaws opening wide, a cone of acidic spittle bursting forth.

It hit a barrier—a solid, impenetrable wall of magical force—and spattered and sizzled. Only a bit of it splashed over the wall, stinging a few of the warriors. But their charge was not slowed. They parted and flowed around the edges of the magical barrier in

perfect unison. On the near side, their troop flowed back together, guided by the armored knights, and closed in on the confused dragon.

Urshula reared and lifted his head high—and was promptly engulfed by a fireball, then a second and a third before he could even react. And when he ducked back down, the warriors were there, slashing, stabbing, and hacking away with abandon. They filtered around the wyrm, cheering and shouting, trying to overwhelm the beast with sudden and brutal fury.

But Urshula was a dragon, after all, the beast of beasts. A sudden frenzy of stamping legs, raking claws, swiping tail, and battering wings quickly stole the advantage.

One knight stood above the fray, barking out orders, lifting his sword high and calling for the warriors to rally around him.

The dragon's maw closed over him to the waist, and lifted him high for all to see. Warriors cried out for him as his armored legs thrashed helplessly.

Urshula clamped down, and the knight's lower torso dropped to the floor. The rest came flying free as well, as Urshula snapped his head about, the knight serving as a missile to crash through several ranks of warriors. Those who fell farthest aside proved the fortunate ones for the time being, though, for the armored missile was fast followed by a second blast of acidic spittle.

Men melted and died.

Before he could begin to applaud the wyrm, Zhengyi looked around to see a barrage of energy bolts—green, blue, and violet—swarming the dragon's way. Urshula's victory roar became a cry of pain as the bolts burned into him, stabbing through scales that could not protect the beast from such attacks.

The dragon spotted the wizards, grouped inside the tunnel entrance just to the left. Ignoring the stabs from the warriors still thrashing as his sides, Urshula spat again.

Stones all around the wizards sizzled and popped, but the three were protected. One did wince in pain, though he still managed to join his companions in the next missile barrage.

Zhengyi, fearing that the dragon would be overwhelmed too quickly, thought he should intervene.

But Urshula reared on his hind legs and spread wide his wings. He beat them furiously, lifting dust, coins, and pebbles from the floor to fly at the distant wizards. The debris did no real damage, but it prevented any further casting—and more importantly, Zhengyi realized, it worked through the protection limits of their magical shielding.

“Brilliant,” the Witch-King applauded.

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The dragon’s reaction was not a surprise to Sir Donegan. Trained by Gareth Dragonsbane himself—a man who had well-earned his surname—Donegan had designed the attack in four specific phases: first, the defeat of the beast’s initial killing breath. Second, the charge. Third, a barrage of magic that should force the dragon’s attention away from the last part, the most deadly part.

The knights Donegan and Bevell sat on their horses back up the tunnel awaiting the dragon’s reaction. As it reared, they spurred their mounts to charge. Lances lowered, the two skilled knights swerved left and right around the magical wall of force, rejoined on the far side of the barrier, and thundered in together at the still-oblivious dragon.

They caught the beast side-by-side in the belly, the weakest point of a dragon’s natural armor. With the weight of their huge steeds driving them on, and the enchantments placed upon those lances, the weapons struck home, cracking through the hard shell of scales and driving deep into the beast’s soft innards.

Down came the roaring beast. But Donegan and Bevell were already moving, turning their mounts aside and leaving their lances quivering in the dragon’s belly. As one, the skilled knights drew forth swords from over their shoulders. Bevell’s broadsword flared with fire at his silent command, while Donegan brought forth a two-handed blade that gleamed with an inner, magical light. As the dragon’s wing descended over him, Donegan clenched his legs

tightly and thrust his weapon up with both hands. The beast howled again and retracted.

Bevell found less success against the opposite wing, and though he landed a solid slash, the limb buffeted him and sent him tumbling from his mount and sprawling to the floor.

“Rally to me!” Donegan called his warriors, and those still capable of battle did just that.

The dragon spun to face him, and Donegan nearly swooned, thinking the moment of his death at hand.

But the wizards struck again, a fireball engulfing the beast’s head and a host of magical missiles disappearing into the flaming sphere.

Donegan used the moment to charge his rushing mount in hard against the dragon’s side. He dismounted and slapped his horse away, then took up his sword in both hands and drove a mighty slash against the beast’s scales. All around him, his warriors cheered and attacked, stabbing and hacking with abandon.

The beast was hurt; the beast swayed.

“Be done with it!” Sir Donegan cried, thinking the moment of victory upon them.

But the dragon spun, its tail flying across, slapping Donegan and the others aside, launching them across the stone and dirt floor.

The knight tried to rise. His helm had turned, stealing his vision, and his sword had flown from his grasp. He fumbled about before a hand grabbed his shoulder and steadied him.

He adjusted his helm and saw Maryin grinning at him and nodding. She handed him his sword.

“Let us be done with this,” she said.

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Zhengyi enjoyed the spectacle. He marveled at the troop’s preparation and fortitude; few men could stand so long in the face of an angry wyrm. Impressive, too, was Urshula’s resilience and ferocity.

But the dragon was sorely wounded, the Witch-King realized. One of the lances had snapped off, and blood poured from the hole—and no doubt the remaining lance head tore at the creature’s insides.

And those wizards came on again, relentless, their fireballs and energy bolts taking a heavy toll.

Zhengyi had come to serve as an equalizer, but surprised he was to find that it was Urshula, and not the humans, who needed his efforts. He could not allow it to be so easy for them.

The Witch-King slipped back into his shadow form and slid into a crack in the wall.



“Fire, this time,” Fisticus the wizard told his two companions. “When the wyrm lifts high its head, engulf it.”

All three wizards readied their spells, watching intently as Fisticus determined the pattern of the dragon’s movements.

“One …” he counted, “two …”

“Do say ‘three,’ ” a raspy voice behind the trio interrupted.

Zhengyi watched the trio stiffen, and he grinned as he imagined the expressions on their faces. He didn’t let that distract him, though, as he began casting his favorite spell.

The wizards whirled around, right in the face of a sudden burst of intertwined multicolored beams of shimmering light.

Fisticus threw his arm up before his eyes while the wizard to his left was bathed in blue. That unfortunate man, blinded by the brilliance of Zhengyi’s spell, tried to scream, but his skin hardened to stone, and he froze in place with his mouth agape.

Purple light engulfed Fisticus and he was gone, just gone, removed from the Prime Material Plane and launched randomly through the multiverse, though at least his abrupt departure allowed him to avoid the blast of lightning that jolted and seared the man to his right. The bolt arced through where Fisticus had been standing and crackled against the wizard statue across the way. The solid rock he had become exploded under the pressure of the lightning, sending finger pebbles and elbow rocks flying.

And a second hue washed over the wizard who had borne the initial shock of the lightning strike. Already down and near death, he mustered all of his remaining energy for one final shriek of agony as a red glow washed over him and he erupted in flames. He

couldn’t even manage to roll on the floor, however, so he just lay there burning.

Zhengyi gave a raspy sigh and shook his head.

“Appreciation, dear Urshula?” he whispered as he turned his attention back to the dragon and the larger fight, to find that his intrusion had not gone unnoticed.

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“The Witch-King!” one man yelled.

At the dragon’s side, Sir Donegan grimaced at the thought that such a foe had come against them at so desperate a time. He could only pray that his soldier was wrong and could only hope that they could be done with the beast quickly.

“Fisticus, finish it!” he yelled as he struck his great sword again against the dragon’s flank.

He managed a roll as he completed the strike to gain a view of the wizards—or of what remained of them. Donegan took note of a shadowy figure against the stone, but he couldn’t pause long enough to consider it at any length.

“Fight on, my warriors! The wyrm is failing!” he cried, rallying his troops and throwing himself with abandon against the great beast.

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Urshula heard that claim, and couldn’t rightly dismiss it. The wizards’ strikes had wounded him badly, and he could feel the tip of a lance rattling around beneath his scaly armor, tearing up his insides.

“Zhengyi? My ally?” Urshula grumbled in the course of his continuing growl, and he was glad indeed to see one of the wizards smoldering on the floor, and the remaining piece of a second standing as stone, blasted to nothingness from the waist up.

But where was Zhengyi?

A sting in Urshula’s side brought him from his contemplation and reminded him of his immediate concerns. He thrashed and stomped a man flat with his hind leg then battered down with his wing,

knocking aside several others. His tail whipped out the other way, driving back yet another group of the stubborn warriors.

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Zhengyi watched patiently from within a crack in the stone, the material components for several spells ready in hand. He silently applauded Urshula's ferocity as the dragon scooped up a man in his jaws and crunched him flat. Then the dragon snapped his head and let fly the human missile, bowling several men over.

In that instant, Zhengyi thought the dragon might prevail.

But Urshula lurched to the side, and Zhengyi spied the great knight who had struck the devastating blow. Urshula tried to turn at the man, too, but a second warrior, the same female scout Zhengyi had first seen enter the dragon's lair, had cunningly made her way to the dragon's back and up his neck. When the distracted wyrm focused on the knight, she drove a slender sword under the back of the dragon's skull.

Zhengyi shook his head and produced the dragon skull phylactery.

"Witch-King!" Urshula bellowed in a great voice that echoed through the chamber.

Then the wyrm reminded Zhengyi and all of the others exactly why dragons were so rightly feared. Urshula leaped up, snapping his head back, forward, then down. The motion flipped the female warrior right over the crown of the dragon's head spikes so violently that she could never have held on. The fall from twenty feet to the stone might have killed her, but the dragon never let it get that far. Biting out, his maw covered her so that her head, feet, and one flailing arm fell free from her body.

And through all of that, the dragon continued his leap and mid air roll. Urshula's size became his primary weapon as he crashed down atop the bulk of the remaining force, crushing them under his great weight.

Zhengyi grimaced as the black dragon's eyes tightened in pain, for that crushing attack forced weapons and ridges of armor through the dragon's scales, injuring him badly as he crushed and thrashed the life from many of his enemies.

But not from the resourceful and valiant knight with the huge sword, Zhengyi saw, as that man danced out from under the tumbling wyrm and spun, slashing hard at the dragon's flailing foreleg then moving past the limb to stab hard at the beast's torso.

He tried to, at least, before an invisible force grabbed at the knight, the hand of telekinesis. As he leaped at the wyrm, he rose up over the beast and kept climbing into the air.

Zhengyi, quite pleased with himself, kept the man climbing.

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Sir Donegan whipped around with great ferocity, trying to break free of the magical grasp. Rage gripped him as surely as the dragon's spell as he saw again and again that image of the great wyrm biting Maryin apart. He went up twenty feet, fifty feet, and more, helpless as the dragon continued to slaughter his warriors, many of whom stared up at their flying leader, mouths hanging open, hope flying from their widened eyes.

Donegan slashed his great sword, as if trying to cut through some physical hand, but there was nothing to hit.

The knight turned his attention to the ceiling, which he fast approached. He braced himself for the impact, but never quite got there.

The invisible force let him go.

Screaming and cursing as he dropped, Sir Donegan refused to accept his fate. His startled cry became a roar of defiance, and he twisted himself around, lining his sword up with the head of the dragon, who did not see him coming.

Donegan's blade drove in against the beast's skull, cracking through the bone. Donegan held on until he, too, smashed into the wyrm, head first. His helmet jolted down, cracking his collarbone at either side. His neck compacted so forcefully that his spine turned to powder. He crunched into place and held for a moment, twisted over backward.

Then he rolled away, off the wyrm, whose great head was held suspended in the air, Donegan's sword quivering in place like a third horn.

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“Witch-King?” Urshula bellowed again, in a voice bubbling with blood. He peered at the wall where the wizards had been felled, and red filled his vision. “Witch-King!”

And Zhengyi answered him, not physically, but telepathically. Urshula spied a dark tunnel before him, and at its end, in bright light, stood the lich, holding the small dragon skull phylactery. Urshula instinctively resisted the pull of it. But there, in Zhengyi’s outstretched hand, was the promise of life, where otherwise there was only death. In that moment of terror, the blackness of oblivion looming, the wyrm surrendered to Zhengyi.

Urshula’s spirit flew from his dying body and rushed down the tunnel into the dragon skull gem.

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Zhengyi marveled at his prize, for the skull glowed bright, seething with the spirit energy of the trapped dragon soul, the newborn dracolich Urshula.

Zhengyi’s newfound ally.

The Witch-King lowered the gem and considered the scene. He had timed his intervention perfectly, for only a couple of the warriors remained alive, and they lay helpless, squirming, groaning, and bleeding on the floor.

Zhengyi didn’t offer them the courtesy of a quick death. He cast another spell and magically departed with his prize taken and his victory complete, leaving them to their slow, painful deaths.

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“You thought you had won those months ago when you defeated the force that had slipped behind you into Vaasa,” Byphast scolded Zhengyi on a cold Damaran winter morning.

“I won the day, indeed,” the Witch-King replied, and he looked up from the great tome on his desk to regard the dragon in elf form.

“My kin are fleeing you,” Byphast went on. “Lord Dragonsbane is a foe we will not face again. The allies arrayed against you are more formidable than you believed.”

“But they are mortal,” Zhengyi corrected. “And soon enough they will grow feeble with age and will wither and die.”

“You believed your kingdom secured,” the dragon countered.

Zhengyi had to refrain from laughing at her, so shaken did she seem by his calm demeanor. For her observations were correct; it was indeed all crumbling around him, and he knew that well. Gareth Dragonsbane could quite possibly win the day in Damara, and in that event the paladin would, at the very least, drive Zhengyi into hiding in a dark hole in Vaasa.

“It amuses me to see a dragon so fretful and obsessed with the near future,” he replied to her.

“Your plan will fail!”

“My plan will sleep. Cannot a dragon, a creature who might raze a town and retire comfortably in her lair for a century or more, understand the concept of patience? You disappoint me, Byphast. Do you not understand that while our enemies are mortal, I am not? And neither are you,” he reminded her, nodding to the shelf beside his desk where several gemstone dragon skulls sat waiting for the spirits of their attuned wyrms.

“My power comes not from my physical form,” the Witch-King continued, “but from the blackness that resides in the hearts of all men.”

He slipped his hands under the covers of the great tome and lifted it just a bit, just enough for Byphast to note the black binding engraved with brands of dragons—rearing dragons, sitting dragons, sleeping dragons, fighting dragons. Zhengyi eased the book back down, reached into his belt pouch, and produced a glowing dragon skull gem.

“Urshula the black,” Byphast remarked.

Zhengyi placed the skull against the center of the opened tome and whispered a few arcane words as he pressed down upon it.

The skull sank into the pages, disappearing within the depths of the tome.

Byphast sucked in her breath and stared hard at the Witch-King.

“If I do not win now, I win later,” Zhengyi explained. “With my allies beside me. Some foolish human, elf, or other mortal creature

will find this tome and will seek the power contained within. In so doing he will unleash Urshula in his greater form."

Zhengyi paused and glanced behind him, drawing Byphast's gaze to a huge bookcase full of similar books.

"His greed, his frailty, his secret desire—nay, desperation—to grasp this great treasure that only I can offer him, will perpetuate my grand schemes, whatever the outcome of the coming battles on the fields of Damara."

"So confident…." Byphast said with a shake of her head and a smile that came from pity.

"Do you seek to sever your bond with the phylactery?" Zhengyi asked. "Do you wish to abandon this gift of immortality that I have offered you?"

Byphast's smile withered.

"I thought not," said Zhengyi. He closed the great book and lifted it into place on the shelf behind him. "My power is as eternal as a reasoning being's fear of death, Byphast. Thus, I am eternal." He glanced back at the newly finished tome. "Urshula was defeated in his lair, slain by the knights of the Bloodstone Army. But that only made him stronger, as King Gareth, or his descendants, will one day learn."

Byphast stood very still for some time, soaking it all in. "I will not continue the fight," she decided. "I will return to the Great Glacier and my distant home."

Zhengyi shrugged as if it did not matter—and at that time, it really did not.

"But you will not sever your bond with the phylactery," he noted.

Byphast stiffened and squared her jaw. "I will live another thousand years," she declared.

But Zhengyi only smiled and said, "So be it. I am patient."

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Bones and Stones

Let's strip things down to the harsh, unmitigated truth (for a change), shall we? The fundamental question of every war has to be "is it worth it?" There's no getting around that. In fact, such a question applies to almost every human endeavor. Is it worth the money and the stress and the trouble of taking that vacation with the young kids? Are the forty hours a week, not counting the commute, worth the paycheck they're offering?

With war, however, this is a particularly interesting question, because those who stand to most benefit from war, in terms of power or treasure, spend their energy in constructing fancy façades to minimize the inevitably harsh truths of battle. And then, when they get their way, those pushing the campaign go to great lengths to gloss over the wretchedness. And thus we have embedded reporters and flag-waving head-nodding super-patriots at the very same time that one side cannot begin to understand the motivations of the flag-waving head-nodding super-patriots of the other side.

I am reminded of the words of an old Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song, "Wooden Ships": "I can see by your coat, my friend, you're from the other side/there's just one thing I'd like to know,/can you tell me please who won?" There's such simplicity there, something so very human and vulnerable and resigned. I can hardly watch the news over the last decade without hearing that song in my thoughts.

I try hard to make sense of war. I have met so many wonderful soldiers and their incredible families over the years. So many letters, so much heartfelt friendship and emotion.

But that nagging question, “Is it worth it?” has to remain first and foremost, and I hope it is always the primary concern for those who have to make the decisions regarding peace or war. Because with war, we too often forget, any answer of “yes” has to get over a tremendously high bar, because of the “Bones and Stones” inevitably left behind, because of the enduring pain when the flags stop waving.

The structure of this story is a bit different; I wrap a mini adventure with Pwent around a previously published Drizzt essay. That essay was inspired by a line in the movie *We Were Soldiers*. At the end, a North Vietnamese colonel laments the victory the Americans achieved and says, to paraphrase, “They think they have won a great victory here, so more will come. The outcome will be the same, but many more men will have to die to get there.” Cut out the over-the-top heroics and battle sequences (I swear that watching most war movies is like watching most sports movies, like *Miracle on Ice*, where suddenly the actual events just aren’t enough and so we have Jim Craig making nine hundred outrageous diving saves for the “drama” of it all … ah well, that’s another essay), and *We Were Soldiers* is quite a powerful movie with many poignant scenes, and asks many tough questions of war and humanity. Those remarks by the NVA colonel have stayed with me, as has the helicopter sequence with the haunting lyrics of “Sgt. MacKenzie.”

Drizzt stripped it all down to the basic, harsh truth in that essay. Like the birds in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, there’s really nothing he can say against the hard truth of the massacre, is there?

Enter Pwent and the orc, two unlikely and ferocious warriors to add a touch of humanity to the seemingly senseless slaughter.

“Bones and Stones” doesn’t answer any questions. It’s not supposed to. It asks questions.

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The Year of the Tankard (1370 DR)

An uneasiness accompanied Thibbledorf Pwent out of Mithral Hall that late afternoon. With the hordes of King Obould pressing so closely on the west and north, Bruenor had declared that none could venture out to those reaches. Pragmatism and simple wisdom surely seemed to side with Bruenor.

It wasn't often that the battlerager, an officer of Bruenor's court, went against the edicts of his beloved King Bruenor. But this was an extraordinary circumstance, Pwent had told himself—though in language less filled with multi-syllable words: "Needs gettin' done."

Still, there remained the weight of going against his beloved king, and the cognitive dissonance of that pressed on him. As if reflecting his pall, the gray sky hung low, thick, and ominous, promising rain.

Rain that would fall upon Gendray Hardhatter, and so every drop would ping painfully against Thibbledorf Pwent's heart.

It wasn't that Gendray had been killed in battle—oh no, not that! Such a fate was accepted, even expected by every member of the ferocious Gutbuster Brigade as willingly as it was by their leader, Thibbledorf Pwent. When Gendray had joined only a few short months before, Pwent had told his father, Honcklebart, a dear friend of many decades, that he most certainly could not guarantee the safety of Gendray.

"But me heart's knowin' that he'll die for a good reason," Honcklebart had said to Pwent, both of them deep in flagons of mead.

"For kin and kind, for king and clan," Pwent had appropriately toasted, and Honcklebart had tapped his cup with enthusiasm, for indeed, what dwarf could ever ask for more?

And so on a windy day atop the cliffs north of Keeper's Dale, the western porch of Mithral Hall, against the charge of an orc horde, the expectations for Gendray had come to pass, and for never a better reason had a Battlehammer dwarf fallen.

As he neared that fateful site, Pwent could almost hear the tumult of battle again. Never had he been so proud of his Gutbusters. He had led them into the heart of the orc charge. Outnumbered many times over by King Obould's most ferocious warriors, the Gutbusters hadn't flinched, hadn't hesitated. Many dwarves had fallen that day but had fallen on the bodies of many, many more orcs.

Pwent, too, had expected to die in that seemingly suicidal encounter, but somehow, and with the support of heroic friends and a clever gnome, he and some of the Gutbusters had found their way to the cliffs and down to Mithral Hall's western doors. It had been a victory bitterly won through honorable and acceptable sacrifice.

Despite that truth, Thibbledorf Pwent had carried with him the echoes of the second part of Honcklebart Hard-hatter's toast, when he had hoisted his flagon proudly again and declared, "And I'm knowin' that dead or hurt, Thibbledorf Pwent'd not be leavin' me boy behind."

Tapping that flagon in toast had been no hard promise for Pwent. "If a dragon's eatin' him, then I'll cut a hole in its belly and pull out his bones!" he had heartily promised, and had meant every word.

But Gendray, dead Gendray, hadn't come home that day.

"Ye left me boy," Honcklebart had said back in the halls after the fight. There was no malice in his voice, no accusation. It was just a statement of fact, by a dwarf whose heart had broken.

Pwent almost wished his old friend had just punched him in the nose, because though Honcklebart was known to have a smashing right cross, it wouldn't have hurt the battlerager nearly as much as that simple statement of fact.

"Ye left me boy."

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I look upon the hillside, quiet now except for the birds. That's all there is. The birds, cawing and cackling and poking their beaks into unseeing

eyeballs. Crows do not circle before they alight on a field strewn with the dead. They fly as the bee to a flower, straight for their goal, with so great a feast before them. They are the cleaners, along with the crawling insects and the rain and the unending wind.

And the passage of time. There is always that. The turn of the day, of the season, of the year.

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G'nurk winced when he came in sight of the torn mountain ridge. How glorious had been the charge! The minions of Obould, proud orc warriors, had swept up the rocky slope against the fortified dwarven position.

G'nurk had been there, in the front lines, one of only a very few who had survived that charge. But despite their losses in the forward ranks, G'nurk and his companions had cleared the path, had taken the orc army to the dwarven camp.

Absolute victory hovered before them, within easy reach, so it had seemed.

Then, somehow, through some dwarven trick or devilish magic, the mountain ridge exploded, and like a field of grain in a strong wind, the orc masses coming in support had been mowed flat. Most of them were still there, lying dead where they had stood proud.

Tinguinguay, G'nurk's beloved daughter, was still there.

He worked his way around the boulders, the air still thick with dust from the amazing blast that had reformed the entire area. The many ridges and rocks and chunks of blasted stone seemed to G'nurk like a giant carcass, as if that stretch of land, like some sentient behemoth, had itself been killed.

G'nurk paused and leaned on a boulder. He brought his dirty hand up to wipe the moisture from his eyes, took a deep breath, and reminded himself that he served Tinguinguay with honor and pride, or he honored her not at all.

He pushed away from the stone, denied its offer to serve as a crutch, and pressed along. Soon he came past the nearest of his dead companions, or pieces of them, at least. Those in the west, nearest the ridge, had been mutilated by a shock wave full of flying stones.

The stench filled his nostrils. A throng of black beetles, the first living things he'd seen in the area, swarmed around the guts of a torso cut in half.

He thought of bugs eating his dead little girl, his daughter who in the distant past had so often used her batting eyes and pouting lips to coerce from him an extra bit of food. On one occasion, G'nurk had missed a required drill because of Tinguinguay, when she'd thoroughly manipulated out of him a visit to a nearby swimming hole. Obould hadn't noticed his absence, thank Gruumsh!

That memory brought a chuckle from G'nurk, but that laugh melted fast into a sob.

Again he leaned on a rock, needing the support. Again he scolded himself about honor and duty, and doing proud by Tinguinguay.

He climbed up on the rock to better survey the battlefield. Many years before, Obould had led an expedition to a volcano, believing the resonating explosions to be a call from Gruumsh. There, where the side of the mountain had blown off into a forest, G'nurk had seen the multitude of toppled trees, all foliage gone, all branches blasted away. The great logs lay in rows, neatly ordered, and it had seemed so surreal to G'nurk that such a natural calamity as a volcanic eruption, the very definition of chaos, could create such a sense of order and purpose.

So it seemed to the orc warrior as he stood upon that rock and looked out across the rocky slope that had marked the end of the horde's charge, for the bodies lay neatly in rows—too neatly.

So many bodies.

"Tinguinguay," G'nurk whispered.

He had to find her. He needed to see her again, and knew that it had to be there and then if it was to be ever—before the birds, the beetles, and the maggots did their work.



When it is done, all that is left are the bones and the stones. The screams are gone; the smell is gone. The blood is washed away. The fattened birds take with them in their departing flights all that identified those fallen warriors as individuals.

Leaving the bones and the stones to mingle and to mix, as the wind or the rain break apart the skeletons and filter them together, as the passage of time buries some, what is left becomes indistinguishable to all but the most careful of observers.



A rock shuffled under his foot, but Pwent didn't hear it. As he scrambled over the last rise along the cliff face, up onto the high ground from which the dwarves had made their stand before retreating into Mithral Hall, a small tumble of rocks cascaded down behind him—and again, he didn't hear it.

He heard the screams and cries, of glory and of pain, of determination against overwhelming odds, and of support for friends who were surely doomed.

He heard the ring of metal on metal, the crunch of a skull under the weight of his heavy, spiked gauntlets, and the sucking sound of his helmet spike driving through the belly of one more orc.

His mind was back in battle as he came over that ridge and looked at the long and stony descent, still littered with the corpses of scores of dwarves and hundreds and hundreds of orcs. The orc charge had come there. The boulders rolling down against them, the giant-manned catapults throwing boulders at him from the side mountain ridge—he remembered vividly that moment of desperation, when only the Gutbusters, *his* Gutbusters, could intervene. He'd led that countercharge down the slope and headlong, furiously, into the orc horde. Punching and kicking, slashing and tearing, crying for Moradin and Clanggeddin and Dumathoin, yelling for King Bruenor and Clan Battlehammer and Mithral Hall. No fear had they shown, no hesitance in their charge, though not one expected to get off that ridge alive.

And so it was with a determined stride and an expression of both pride and lament that Thibbledorf Pwent walked down that slope once more, pausing only now and again to lift a rock and peg it at a nearby bird that was intent to feast upon the carcass of a friend.

He spotted the place where his brigade had made their valiant stand, and saw the dwarf bodies intermingled with walls of dead

orcs—walls and walls, piled waist deep and even higher. How well the Gutbusters had fought!

He hoped that no birds had pecked out Gendray's eyes. Honcklebart deserved to see his son's eyes again.

Pwent ambled over and began flinging orc bodies out of the way, growling with every throw. He was too angry to notice the stiffness, even when one arm broke off and remained in his grasp. He just chucked it after the body, spitting curses.

He came to his first soldier, and winced in recognition of Tooliddle Ironfist, who had been one of the longest-serving of the Gutbuster Brigade.

Pwent paused to offer a prayer for Tooliddle to Moradin, but in the middle of that prayer, he paused more profoundly and considered the task before him. It wouldn't be difficult, taking Gendray home, but leaving all the rest of them out there …

How could he do that?

The battlerager stepped back and kicked a dead orc hard in the face. He put his hands on his hips and considered the scene before him, trying to figure out how many trips and how many companions he would need to bring all those boys home. For it became obvious to him that he couldn't leave them, any of them, out there for the birds and the beetles.

Big numbers confused Thibbledorf Pwent, particularly when he was wearing his boots, and particularly when, as on this occasion, he became distracted.

Something moved to the northwest of him.

At first, he thought it a large bird or some other carrion animal, but then it hit him, and hit him hard.

It was an orc—a lone orc, slipping through the maze of blasted stone and blasted bodies, and apparently oblivious to Pwent.

He should have slipped down to the ground and pretended to be among the fallen. That was the preferred strategy, obviously, a ready-made ambush right out of the Gutbusters' practiced tactics.

Pwent thought of Gendray, of Tooliddle, and all the others. He pictured a bird poking out Gendray's eyes, or a swarm of beetles crunching on his rotting intestines. He smelled the fight again and

heard the cries, remembering vividly the desperate and heroic stand.

He should have slipped down to the ground and feigned death among the corpses, but instead he spat, he roared, and he charged.

Who will remember those who died here, and what have they gained to compensate for all that they, on both sides, lost?

The look upon a dwarf's face when battle is upon him would argue, surely, that the price is worth the effort, that warfare, when it comes to a dwarven clan, is a noble cause. Nothing to a dwarf is more revered than fighting to help a friend. Theirs is a community bound tightly by loyalty, by blood shared and blood spilled.

And so, in the life of an individual, perhaps this is a good way to die, a worthy end to a life lived honorably, or even to a life made worthy by this last ultimate sacrifice.

G'nurk could hardly believe his ears, or his eyes, and as the sight registered fully—a lone dwarf rushing down the slope at him—a smile curled on his face.

Gruumsh had delivered this, he knew, as an outlet for his rage, a way to chase away the demons of despair over Tinguinguay's fall.

G'nurk shied from no combat. He feared no dwarf, surely, and so while the charge of the heavily armored beast—all knee spikes, elbow spikes, head spikes, and black armor so devilishly ridged that it could flay the hide off an umber hulk—would have weakened the knees of most, for G'nurk it came as a beautiful and welcome sight.

Still grinning, the orc pulled the heavy spear off his back and brought it around, twirling it slowly so that he could take a better measure of its balance. It was no missile. G'nurk had weighted its back end with an iron ball.

The dwarf rambled on, slowing not at all at the sight of the formidable weapon. He crashed through a pair of dead orcs, sending them bouncing aside, and he continued his single-noted roar, a bellow of absolute rage and … pain?

G’nurk thought of Tinguinguay and surely recognized pain, and he too began to growl and let it develop into a defiant roar.

He kept his spear horizontally before him until the last moment, then stabbed out the point and dropped the weighted end to the ground, stamping it in with his foot to fully set the weapon.

He thought he had the dwarf easily skewered, but this one was not quite as out –of control as he appeared. The dwarf flung himself to the side in a fast turn and reached out with his leading left arm as he came around, managing to smack aside G’nurk’s shifting spear.

The dwarf charged in along the shaft.

But G’nurk reversed and kicked up the ball, stepping out the other way and heaving with all his strength to send the back end of the weapon up fast and hard against the dwarf’s chest, and with such force as to stop the furious warrior in his tracks, even knock him back a bouncing step.

G’nurk rushed out farther to the dwarf’s left, working his spear cleverly to bring it end over end. As soon as he completed the weapon’s turn, he went right back in, stabbing hard, thinking again to score a fast kill.

“For Tinguinguay!” he cried in Dwarvish, because he wanted his enemy to know that name, to hear that name as the last thing he ever heard!

The dwarf fell flat; the spear thrust fast above him, hitting nothing but air.

With amazing agility for one so armored and so stocky, the dwarf tucked his legs and came up fast, his helmet spike slicing up beside the spear, and he rolled his head, perfectly parrying G’nurk’s strike.

He kept rolling his head, turning the spear under the helmet spike. He hopped back and bent low, driving the spear low and getting his belly behind the tip. And, amazingly, he rolled again, turning the spear!

Almost babbling with disbelief, G’nurk tried to thrust forward on one of those turns, hoping to impale the little wretch.

But the dwarf had anticipated just that, had invited just that, and as soon as the thrust began, the dwarf turned sidelong and slapped his hand against the spear shaft.

“I’m taking out both yer eyes for a dead friend,” he said, and G’nurk understood him well enough, though his command of Dwarvish was far from perfect.

The dwarf was inside his weapon’s reach, and his grip proved surprisingly strong and resilient against G’nurk’s attempt to break his weapon free.

So the orc surprised his opponent. He balled up his trailing, mailed fist and slugged the grinning dwarf right in the face, a blow that would have knocked almost any orc or any dwarf flat to the ground.

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I cannot help but wonder, though, in the larger context, what of the overall? What of the price, the worth, the gain? Will Obould accomplish anything worth the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of his dead? Will he gain anything long lasting? Will the dwarven stand made out on that high cliff bring Bruenor’s people anything worthwhile? Could they not have slipped into Mithral Hall, to tunnels so much more easily defended?

And a hundred years from now, when there remain only the bones and the stones, will anyone care?

I wonder what fuels the fires that burn images of glorious battle in the hearts of so many of the sentient races, my own paramount among them. I look at the carnage on the slope and I see the inevitable sight of emptiness. I imagine the cries of pain. I hear in my head the calls for loved ones when the dying warrior knows his last moment is upon him. I see a tower fall with my dearest friend atop it. Surely the tangible remnants, the rubble and the bones, are hardly worth the moment of battle. But is there, I wonder, something less tangible there, something of a greater place? Or is there, perhaps—and this is my fear—something of a delusion to it all that drives us to war again and again?

Along that latter line of thought, is it within us all, when the memories of war have faded, to so want to be a part of something great that we throw aside the quiet, the calm, the mundane, the peace itself? Do we collectively come to equate peace with boredom and complacency? Perhaps we hold these embers of war within us, dulled only by sharp memories of the pain and the loss, and when that smothering blanket dissipates with the passage of healing time, those fires flare again to life.

I saw this within myself, to a smaller extent, when I realized and admitted to myself that I was not a being of comforts and complacency, that only by the wind on my face, the trails beneath my feet, and the adventure along the road could I truly be happy.

I'll walk those trails indeed, but it seems to me that it is another thing altogether to carry an army along beside me, as Obould has done. For there is the consideration of a larger morality here, shown so starkly in the bones among the stones. We rush to the call of arms, to the rally, to the glory, but what of those caught in the path of this thirst for greatness?

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Thibbledorf Pwent wasn't just any dwarf. He knew that his posture, and his need to speak and grin, would allow the punch, but indeed, that was how the battlerager preferred to start every tavern brawl.

He saw the mailed fist flying for his face—in truth, he might have been able to partially deflect it had he tried.

He didn't want to.

He felt his nose crunch as his head snapped back, felt the blood gushing forth.

He was still smiling.

"My turn," he promised.

But instead of throwing himself at the orc, he yanked the spear shaft in tight against his side, then hopped and rolled over the weapon, grabbing it with his second hand as well as he went. When he came back to his feet, he had the spear in both hands and up across his shoulders behind his neck.

He scrambled back and forth, and turned wildly in circles until at last the orc relinquished the spear.

Pwent hopped to face him. The dwarf twisted his face into a mask of rage as the orc reached for a heavy stone, and with a growl, he flipped both his arms up over the spear, then drove them down.

The weapon snapped and Pwent caught both ends and tossed them out to the side.

The rock slammed against his chest, knocking him back a step.

“Oh, but yerself’s gonna hurt,” the battlerager promised.

He leaped forward, fists flying, knees pumping, and head swinging, so that his helmet spike whipped back and forth right before the orc’s face.

The orc leaned back, back, and stumbled and seemed to topple, and Pwent howled and lowered his head and burst forward. He felt his helmet spike punch through chain links and leather batting, slide through orc flesh, crunch through orc bone, a sensation the battlerager had felt so many times in his war-rich history.

Pwent snapped upright, taking his victim with him, lifting the bouncing orc right atop his head, impaled on the long spike.

Surprisingly, though, Pwent found himself facing his opponent. Only as the orc stepped forward, sword extended, did the battlerager understand the ruse. The orc had feigned the fall and had propped up one of the corpses in his place (and had retrieved a sword from the ground in the same move), and the victim weighing down on Pwent’s head had been dead for many days.

And now the real opponent seemed to have an open charge and thrust to Thibbledorf Pwent’s heart.

The next few moments went by in a blur. Stabs and swats traded purely on reflex. Pwent got slugged and gave a couple out in return. The sword nicked his arm, drawing blood on his black armor, but in that move, the battlerager was able to drive the weapon out wider than the orc had anticipated, and step in for a series of short and heavy punches. As the orc finally managed to back out, he did manage a left cross that stung Pwent’s jaw, and before the battlerager could give chase, that sword came back in line.

This one’s good—very good for an orc—Pwent thought.

Another vicious flurry had them dancing around each other, growling and punching, stabbing and dodging. All the time, Pwent carried nearly three hundred pounds of dead orc atop his head. It couldn’t last, the dwarf knew. Not like this.

A sword slash nearly took out his gut as he just managed to suck in his belly and throw back his hips in time to avoid. Then he used the overbalance, his head, bearing the weight of the dead orc, too far out in front of his hips, to propel him forward suddenly.

He came up launching a wild left hook, but to his surprise, the orc dropped into a deep crouch and his fist whipped overhead. Improvisation alone saved the stumbling Pwent, for rather than try to halt the swing, as instinct told him, he followed through even farther, turning and lifting his right foot as he came around.

He kicked out. He needed to connect and he did, sending the orc stumbling back another couple of steps.

But Pwent, too, the corpse rolling around his helmet spike, fell off balance. He couldn't hope to recover fast enough to counter the next assault.

The orc saw it, too, and he planted his back foot and rushed forward for the kill.

Pwent couldn't stop him.

But the orc's eyes widened suddenly as something to the side apparently caught his attention. Before he could finish the strike, the battlerager, never one to question a lucky break, tightened every muscle in his body, then snapped his head forward powerfully, extricating the impaled orc, launching the corpse right into his opponent.

The orc stumbled back a step and issued a strange wail. But Pwent didn't hesitate, rushing forward and leaping in a twisting somersault right over the corpse and the living orc. As he came around, rolling over his opponent's shoulder, the battlerager slapped his forearm hard under the orc's chin while slapping his other hand across its face the other way, catching a grip on hair and leather helm. When he landed on his feet, behind the orc, Pwent had the battle won. With the orc's head twisted out far tothe left and the warrior off-balance—surely to fall, except that Pwent held him aloft—G'nurk was unable to do anything about it.

A simple jerk with one hand, while driving his forearm back the other way, would snap the orc's neck, while Pwent's ridged bracer, already drawing blood on the orc's throat, would tear out the creature's windpipe.

Pwent set himself to do just that, but something about the orc's expression, a detachment, a profound wound, gave him pause.

“Why’d ye stop?” the battlerager demanded, loosening his grip just enough to allow a reply, and certain that he could execute the orc at any time.

The orc didn’t answer, and Pwent jostled its head painfully.

“Ye said ‘for’ something,” Pwent pressed. “For what?”

When the orc didn’t immediately respond, he gave a painful tug.

“You do not deserve to know her name,” the orc grunted with what little breath he could find.

“Her?” Pwent asked. “Ye got a lover out here, do ye? Ye ready to join her, are ye?”

The orc growled and tried futilely to struggle, as if Pwent had hit a nerve.

“Well?” he whispered.

“My daughter,” the orc said, and to Pwent’s surprise, he seemed to just give up, then. Pwent felt him go limp below his grasp.

“Yer girl? What do ye mean? What’re ye doing out here?” Again, the orc paused, and Pwent jostled him viciously. “Tell me!”

“My daughter,” the orc said, or started to say, for his voice cracked and he couldn’t get through the word.

“Yer daughter died out here?” Pwent asked. “In the fight? Ye lost yer girl?”

The orc didn’t answer, but Pwent saw the truth of his every question right there on the broken warrior’s face.

Pwent followed the orc’s hollow gaze to the side, to where several more corpses lay. “That’s her, ain’t it?” he asked.

“Tinguinguay,” the orc mouthed, almost silently, and Pwent could hardly believe it when he noted a tear running from the orc’s eye.

Pwent swallowed hard. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

He tightened his grip, telling himself to just be done with it.

To his own surprise, he hoisted the orc up to its feet and threw it forward.

“Just get her and get out o’ here,” the battlerager said past the lump in his throat.

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Who will remember those who died here, and what have they gained to compensate for all that they, on both sides, lost?

Whenever we lose a loved one, we resolve, inevitably, to never forget, to remember that dear person for all our living days. But we the living contend with the present, and the present often commands all of our attention. And so as the years pass, we do not remember those who have gone before us every day, or even every tenday. Then comes the guilt, for if I am not remembering Zaknafein—my father, my mentor who sacrificed himself for me—then who is? And if no one is, then perhaps he really is gone. As the years pass, the guilt will lessen, because we forget more consistently and the pendulum turns in our self-serving thoughts to applaud ourselves on those increasingly rare occasions when we do remember! There is always the guilt, perhaps, because we are self-centered creatures to the last. It is the truth of individuality that cannot be denied.

In the end, we, all of us, see the world through our own, personal eyes.

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G'nurk broke his momentum and swung around to face the surprising dwarf. "You would let me leave?" he asked in Dwarvish.

"Take yer girl and get out o' here."

"Why would you …?"

"Just *get!*" Pwent growled. "I got no time for ye, ye dog. Ye came here for yer girl, and good enough for her and for yerself! So take her and get out o' here!"

G'nurk understood almost every word, certainly enough to comprehend what had just happened.

He looked over at his girl—his dear, dead girl—then glanced back at the dwarf and asked, "Who did you lose?"

"Shut yer mouth, dog," Pwent barked at him. "And get ye gone afore I change me mind."

The tone spoke volumes to G'nurk. The pain behind the growl rang out clearly to the orc, who carried so similar a combination of hate and grief.

He looked back to Tinguinguay. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the dwarf lower his head and turn to go.

G’nurk was no average orc warrior. He had served in Obould’s elite guard for years, and as a trainer for those who had followed him into that coveted position. The dwarf had beaten him—through a trick, to be sure—and to G’nurk that was no small thing; never had he expected to be defeated in such a manner.

But now he knew better.

He covered the ground between himself and the dwarf with two leaps, and as the dwarf spun to meet the charge, G’nurk hit him with a series of quick slaps and shortened stabs to keep him, most of all, from gaining any balance.

He kept pressing, pushing, and prodding, never allowing a counter, never allowing the dwarf to set any defense.

He pushed the dwarf back, almost over, but the stubborn bearded creature came forward.

G’nurk sidestepped and crashed the pommel of his sword against the back of the dwarf’s shoulder, forcing the dwarf to overbalance forward even more. When he reached up to grab at G’nurk, to use the orc as leverage, G’nurk ducked under that arm, catching it as he went so that when he came up fast behind the arm, he had it twisted such that the dwarf had no choice but to fall headlong.

The dwarf wound up flat on his back, G’nurk standing over him, the sword in tight against his throat.

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I have heard parents express their fears of their own mortality soon after the birth of a child. It is a fear that stays with a parent, to a great extent, through the first dozen years of a child’s life. It is not for the child that they fear, should they die—though surely there is that worry, as well—but rather for themselves. What father would accept his death before his child was truly old enough to remember him?

For who better to put a face to the bones among the stones? Who better to remember the sparkle in an eye before the crow comes a’calling?

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“Bah, ye murderin’ treacherous dog!” Thibbledorf Pwent yelled. “Ye got no honor, nor did yer daugh—” He bit the word off as

G’nurk pressed the blade in tighter.

“Never speak of her,” the orc warned, and he backed off the sword just a bit.

“Ye’re thinking this honorable, are ye?”

G’nurk nodded.

Pwent nearly spat with disbelief. “Ye dog! How can ye?”

G’nurk stepped back, taking the sword with him. “Because now you know that I hold gratitude for your mercy, dwarf,” he explained. “Now you know in your heart that you made the right choice. You carry with you from this field no burden of guilt for your mercy. Do not think this anything more than it is: a good deed repaid. If we meet in the lines, Obould against Bruenor, then know I will serve my king.”

“And meself, me own!” Pwent proclaimed as he pulled himself to his feet.

“But you are not my enemy, dwarf,” the orc added, and he stepped back, bowed, and walked away.

“I ain’t yer durned friend, neither!”

G’nurk turned and smiled, though whether in agreement or in thinking that he knew otherwise, Pwent could not discern.

It had been a strange day.

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I wish the crows would circle and the wind would carry them away, and the faces would remain forever to remind us of the pain. When the clarion call to glory sounds, before the armies anew trample the bones among the stones, let the faces of the dead remind us of the cost.

It is a sobering sight before me, the red-splashed stones.

It is a striking warning in my ears, the cawing of the crows.

—Drizzt Do’Urden

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *REALMS OF THE DEAD*
WIZARDS OF THE COAST, 2010



IRULAĐOON

It's highly recommended that you read the novel The Ghost King *before you read this story!*

When young writers ask me for advice, I always answer, "If you can quit, then quit. If you can't quit, you're a writer." I'm not being flippant with that response. I mean every word. Writing isn't a "job" and it certainly isn't a fast track to fame and fortune! The writing itself has to be the point of it all.

So why am I a writer? Why can't I quit? Sure, it's a successful business for me now, but why couldn't I quit back in 1984–1987, when I had nothing to show for my thousands of hours of work but a handful of rejection letters? And even now, though I'm surely grateful for the career success, I have publicly remarked that if I ever hit the lottery, I'd probably write more than I am now, but publish far less.

Because it's not about the business, you see. It's never been about the business. It can't be about the business of writing. The business of writing serves as the enabler for the actual writing, and the actual writing is the only thing that matters.

Why?

For many years, I thought it was about the readers, and surely there is great incentive and comfort to be found in the many letters and responses to my work. From the soldier in the desert, telling me that my books helped him get through the down times between missions, to the kid with cancer who takes strength in Drizzt, to the

high schooler who tells me he has no friends, but it's okay because he can spend his days with the Companions of the Hall—all of that is satisfying and amazing and how blessed am I to be invited into someone else's life like that?

But still, it has to be more, and it is, and I don't think I really appreciated this until fairly recently. Why am I a writer? Because writing is the process I use to make sense of the world, of existence, of life and of death. My writing is my internal dialogue—I wonder, had I realized this before, would I ever have let you all in?

I have often said that Drizzt is who I wish I had the courage to be, but more than that, he and others are the catalyst for my questions and hopefully the path to my answers.

Nowhere in all of my body of work is this more evident than in "Iruladoon"—and I mean the concept and not just the story. The changes in the Realms, the inevitability that things had to change for the Companions of the Hall, have hit hard in the Salvatore household. These are friends I've known for more than twenty years. Might a heroic death or four have sufficed? Perhaps, but if I've used these friends to explore the questions of life, why would I not continue with them to ask the bigger questions beyond this existence? This is fantasy, after all, and in a world with active gods and powerful magic.

If I'm going to strip the concept of war bare in "Bones and Stones," why not strip the concept of the afterlife bare here in "Iruladoon"? I remember when I was a kid, a joking uncle often remarked, "If heaven is a bunch of fat people singing and blowing horns, I'm going to hell!"

Most fun of all, Iruladoon is an evolving concept for me. I don't have all the answers yet of what's going on here, although it is becoming increasingly clear in my thoughts. This is yet another side street for me, another journey to a fantastical place where I can ask some important questions of myself and the point of it all, and where I hope I'll inspire those same questions in readers.

I want to know why Catti-brie is singing. Trust me: I will find out.





Forest of Iruladoon
Spring in the waning years of the Post-Spellplague

"We're not going to get there in time!" shouted a frantic Lathan Obridock.

He turned back from the prow to regard his fellow fishermen, his face wet from spray as *Larson's Boneyard* bounced across the considerable swells on the always unpredictable Lac Dinneshere. His teeth chattered, both from fear and from the brutal cold of Icewind Dale waters, lakes that spent more than half the year covered in thick ice.

"Young Lathan, be at ease," counseled Addadearber of the Lightning, a rather colorful and flamboyant resident of Caer-Dineval, the boat's home port on the western bank of the great lake, one of three that defined this region about the singular mountain known as Kelvin's Cairn. "I'd not have sailed with Ashelia Larson there if I thought she'd lead me to a watery grave!"

As he spoke, Addadearber waved his arms dramatically, but the effect was much less so than usual, since he had abandoned his red wizard robes for garments more practical to sailing. Nothing could pull a man to the bottom faster than water-soaked woolen robes, after all. Addadearber still wore his floppy black hat, though. Once conical and pointed, standing tall and straight, the hat was bent over halfway to its apex, its point leaning to Addadearber's left-hand side, and its once-stiff brim sagging on both sides. It seemed a fitting reflection of the aging wizard, with his gray hair and bushy gray beard, crooked posture, and with his magic, too, rendered unreliable at best and often impotent by the fall of Mystra's Weave, the great event known throughout the Realms as the Spellplague.

“You’re old and don’t care if you die, then!” accused the youngest member of *Boneyard’s* crew, Spragan Rubrik, at fifteen almost two years Lathan’s junior. His long curly brown hair dripped water from every lock, but it seemed obvious that his darker brown eyes would have been wet with moisture anyway, as he had been the first to discover the leak in the fish hold, the cold, dark water of Lac Dinneshere creeping in to claim her prize.

“I’d watch my wagging tongue, were I speaking to Addadearber of the Lightning,” advised Ashelia from the middeck tiller, her tone decidedly less dread-ridden than that of the two young fishermen. Nearing middle age and quite sturdy for her gender, the broad-shouldered Ashelia was still a quite handsome woman, with straight blond hair, sharply parted on the right, hanging to her shoulders, and light gray eyes shining. Her skin retained the texture and look of porcelain, unlike the other veteran fishermen, with just a hint of a tan showing so early after the end of a particularly deep winter.

“He’s hoping the old warlock will turn him into something that can swim, then,” quipped the fifth man from under the low-pulled hood of his forest green cloak.

“A toad is my preference,” Addadearber replied. “And ’tis true that toads can swim. How far is another matter, particularly given the size of the knuckleheads we’ve been pulling in for two days. I would take bets that the poor little laddie wouldn’t paddle ten good kicks before a ten-pounder got him. What’s your guess then, Roundie?”

The cloaked man just chuckled softly in reply, both from Addadearber’s teasing description and from the use of his nickname. He was known about Ten-Towns as Roundabout, because he always seemed to be exactly that. “Roundabout and never here,” was the phrase often spoken regarding the ranger, whose real name few knew, and which he never seemed willing to share. He was of medium height and muscular, but slender, with long, straight black hair and piercing eyes, one brown, one blue—a trick, it was rumored, of his mixed heritage. His ears were quite long, and poked through his hair. He didn’t try to hide the fact that his veins coursed with elf blood.

Spragan turned his alarmed expression to Lathan, but the older boy just shook his head and brushed the blond locks from in front of his blue eyes.

Addadearber began to whisper something then, something that resembled the incantation of a spell, and both young fishermen turned to regard him with great alarm, which of course turned the corners of the old wizard's lips up in a satisfied grin.

"Enough o' that," Ashelia said to him. "Them boys're scared enough." She turned a severe look upon the two of them as she continued, "I'd have thought they'd been out on the waters enough now to know that a little leak isn't sending *Boneyard* to the grave, especially me sister's own Lathan there, sailor blood and all—not that ye'd know he's got any blood in him in looking at his face just now!"

"We've never been this far—" Spragan started to protest, but Ashelia cut him short.

"And enough from yerself!" she scolded. "Four generations o' Rubriks been sailing Dinneshere, and ye've a grandda, an aunt, and two uncles who call the Lac their eternal resting place. I took ye on to train ye, for the wishes o' yer ma—both of ye! Ye think they'd have trusted me with the lot o' ye if I didn't know the waters? And ye think I'd take ye out as full crew if I didn't think ye ready for it? So don't ye prove me wrong here. Lathan, ye stay up front and get yer sounding rope ready as we near the eastern shore, and yerself, Spragan, grab a pail and get to the hold."

"There's too much—"

"And don't ye make me tell ye again, or I'm knowing a way to drop a hundred and fifty pounds from our weight real quick."

With a last look to Lathan, Spragan scurried away. They heard him stumble down the aft ladder then splash about in the watery hold. A trapdoor near the taffrail popped open, and after more splashing, Spragan flung a bucketful of water up and out, to splash into *Boneyard*'s wake.

"Should I go and help the lad?" Roundabout asked.

Ashelia waved the notion away. "We've picked up the eastern current already and we're not so far. Ye paid me too well for yer

transport to the eastern shore for me to make ye work yer way across. Now regarding the old spell-thrower …"

"Bah, but you employ me to find fish, not throw water," Addadearber replied. "I suffer your pittance of coin that I might glimpse your beauty, but there are limits to even your considerable charms."

Ashelia's forced grin and subdued chuckle revealed that the woman knew sarcasm when she heard it—yet another reason the old wizard was so fond of her.

Ashelia's confidence in *Boneyard* was not misplaced. The seasoned sailor knew the condition of the boat from the feel of the tiller and the tug of the sails, and though she had to work hard to keep *Boneyard* moving along her desired course, they made the secret inlet and the quiet lagoon quite comfortably—and would have, even if Ashelia had not kept poor Spragan and Lathan bailing all the way.

Not many people knew about that place—just a few of Caer-Dineval's fishermen, and Roundabout, of course, who knew the wilderness around the three lakes better than anyone in Ten-Towns. A solitary dock stuck out from the lagoon beach, with a single-roomed cottage behind it, and that in front of a small but thick forest. That alone was a remarkable thing, for most of Lac Dinneshere was bordered by rocky bluffs and barren tundra. But the bluffs both north and south were a bit higher than usual, shielding the wood. The forest, second in size in Icewind Dale only to Lonelywood on the banks of Maer Dualdon far to the west, like the dock and cabin, was a well-kept secret.

Larson's Boneyard glided in easily under Ashelia's skilled hand, with Lathan and Spragan stumbling around to secure the ropes.

"Water's not deep," Ashelia explained.

"I can see the bottom!" Spragan confirmed.

"Even if she fills, she's not for sinking here, so we can patch her and bail her, and get back out in short order," said Ashelia. "Tools, tar, and planks in the cabin."

"A resourceful lot, you fisherfolk," Addadearber congratulated her.

"Not all," Ashelia replied. "But them that ain't are dead, or soon to be. Lac Dinneshere's not forgivin' to fools."

With Addadearber's magical assistance heating some tar and blowing aside water in the hold so that Ashelia could set the patch plank in place, it didn't take long to make the minor repair, but since the sun was low in the west, they decided to stay the rest of the day and that night ashore.

"Pick some good ones for our supper," the captain told her young crewmembers. "Then bail her down below the patch so we can see if she's holding and go out and get us firewood for the night."

She left the two young men to their tasks and moved to the dock and the shore, to find the wizard and the ranger staring into the forest, perplexed.

"What do ye know, then?" she asked.

"It's a good season," Roundabout replied, indicating the forest. As she followed his gaze, Ashelia understood what he meant. The wood looked thicker and more vibrant than she remembered, and the air was full of the scent of flowering plants and the sounds of forest life.

Ashelia wore the most puzzled look of all. "Was here in the autumn," she explained. "Something's different. It's bigger."

"A trick of the Spellplague?" Addadearber posited. "Some magic gone awry, perhaps."

"Everything is about magic with you, wizard," Roundabout said, drawing an arc of one of Addadearber's bushy eyebrows. "It was a good winter, full of snow, and the melt has been consistent," the ranger added. "Even here in the dale, life finds a way to flourish."

"Because we're a resourceful lot," Ashelia added and started for the cabin, the other two moving in her wake.

And none of them were convinced by Roundabout's argument that nothing unusual was going on, the ranger least of all. They could feel it, like a heartbeat in the ground beneath their feet. They could smell it and could hear it, a vibrancy in the air.

They did a bit of cleaning—the ranger scooped out the fire pit—and organized the cabin's small table and chairs, and claimed a piece of the floor for their respective beds. Lathan and Spragan joined them shortly, arms laden with fish, knucklehead trout mostly, but with an assortment of blues and spotted bass for variety.

"Seems to be holding," Lathan reported.

Roundabout tossed him an axe he had found leaning against one wall.

“Enough for cooking and for keeping us warm through the night,” Ashelia instructed, and the two young sailors set out.

“I should get me a couple of those,” Addadearber remarked as they left.

“They can be helpful,” Ashelia agreed.

“More trouble than they’re worth,” the ranger said, and when the other two gave him amused looks, he added, “And no, I am not letting them ruin my meal with their no doubt impressive cooking skills.” He scooped up the largest of the fish, pulled a knife from his belt, and went outside to clean the thing.

With a waggle of his fingers, Addadearber animated a second fish and danced it out the door behind the ranger.

“Ye’re holding faith in yer magic, then,” said Ashelia. “Not many others’re doing the same.”

“Minor dweomers,” the wizard explained. “We cannot simply cease with our spellcasting, else we’ll never retrieve our skills when the Weave repairs.”

“If,” Ashelia corrected.

Addadearber conceded the point with a shrug. “And if it does not, we must adapt to whatever magic remains, or evolves. I employ my spells every day, and often. As magic shifts, I will watch and I will learn, while my less courageous colleagues will find themselves far behind me.”

“And Addadearber will take over the world!” Ashelia said, grinning widely. “Or Icewind Dale, at the least. Are ye worthy o’ that kingdom, wizard?”

“What ill have I done to deserve it?” Addadearber replied.

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“My fingers are freezing. I can barely hold the thing!” Lathan complained, swinging the axe at the end of one arm.

“I’ll take it,” Spragan was quick to reply, but all he received in answer was a scowl.

“I’m older. You just collect the kindli—” Lathan stopped short, confused when he glanced to his left to see that Spragan was no longer beside him on the trail, that the trail itself was no longer the same as he remembered. He stood beside a stand of birch, but didn’t remember passing it. “Spragan?”

No answer.

Lathan looked all around, and the ground behind seemed strangely unfamiliar, though he had just crossed. When he turned back to look ahead, he saw a copse of thick trees crowded in front of him, with no sign of the trail.

“Spragan!” he called more loudly. He moved off quickly in one direction for a short bit then back the other way, then back the way he had come.

“Spragan!”

“What?” his younger friend answered from right beside him, so suddenly Lathan nearly swung the axe at him.

“What’s the matter?” Spragan asked.

Lathan shook his head. “Let’s get done and get out of here.”

Spragan looked at him as though he had no idea what Lathan might be talking about, but he shrugged and indicated a nearby hillside where several older trees had shed their branches. “Kindling,” he announced, and started away.

Lathan took a deep breath and berated himself for showing such irrational cowardice in front of the younger boy. He took up the axe with grim determination, sighted a nearby young elm, and decided that a bit of exercise and axe-swinging might be just what he needed to settle his nerves.

He hoisted the axe in both his hands, wringing the cold out of them, as he strode purposefully toward his goal. As he neared, he glanced back to make sure that Spragan remained in sight.

He couldn’t see his friend. He couldn’t even seem to locate the hillside Spragan had indicated, though he hadn’t traveled more than a dozen steps.

Lathan gripped the axe more tightly.

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Spragan suffered no such reservations or uneasy feelings. He danced through the thick underbrush and among the many wildflowers, gathering twigs and small branches. It had been a long day and he was hungry. He licked his lips repeatedly, almost tasting the trout in anticipation.

He bent down to a shrub and picked up an old, dry, long-dead branch, eyes widening as he thought his job might be done with but one catch. He propped the branch against a tree and kicked at its center, breaking it in half, then bent to retrieve one of the pieces so he could break it again.

He froze halfway down, seeing that he was not alone.

She smiled at him as only a young girl could, bright and beaming, and with a shake of her head that sent her long auburn hair dancing over her girlish shoulders. Her dress, too, caught his attention, for it seemed so out of place, inadequate against the chill winds of Icewind Dale. White and full of ruffles, it seemed more a gown fitting for a grand ball in Bryn Shander than something one would wear into the forest. Even the black cloak tied around her shoulders appeared more fashionable than warm.

“What are you doing out … Who are you?” Spragan sputtered.

The girl smiled and stared at him.

“Do you live here?”

She giggled and dashed behind a tree.

Spragan dropped the branch and rushed to follow her, but when he went around the tree, she was nowhere to be seen.

She was behind him! He sensed it without turning. Spragan jumped forward a step and whirled around.

It was her, but it wasn’t her, the girl before him was his age, at least.

And she took his breath away. She had to be the older sister of the child he’d just seen, with her bright smile, flowing reddish-brown hair, and blue eyes—so blue he seemed to sink right into them as he stared at her. But it wasn’t her older sister, Spragan sensed. It was the same girl, only older, and dressed the same. Confused, the poor young man reached for her arm.

His hand went right through her as she vanished, just faded to nothingness.

A young girl's giggle had him spinning back around, and there she was, right there, and no older than eight.

And she was gone again. A woman's laughter turned him once more, and she was as old as his mother, though still incredibly beautiful.

A young girl again. A teenager, like him. A child once more. A woman, no more a girl. An old crone … One after another they appeared to him, all around him, laughing—laughing at him!—and turning him this way and that. Poor Spragan jumped around, then tried to sprint away, stumbling down the hillside.

Singing filled the air around him, sweet and melancholy, and peppering him with a range of emotions. He tried to pick up speed, but stumbled again then caught himself fast against one tree and skidded to an abrupt halt as he used it to turn around.

And she was there, right in front of him, a woman again, perhaps twenty-five years of age. She wasn't singing anymore, and wasn't smiling, her face tight, her eyes intense. Spragan shrank back from her, but his legs wouldn't heed his command to run.

The woman breathed deeply, her arms lifting to her sides, her form blurring suddenly as the air around her shimmered with some unknown energy. Her hair blew back and fluttered wildly, though there was no wind, and her layered gown did likewise as she rose up tall before him—no, not tall, he realized to his horror! She floated in the air! And purple flames erupted all around her, and her eyes rolled up into her head, showing only white.

Spragan gave a cry of horror and hot winds buffeted him and flung him to the ground.

"Who are you?" he cried, scrambling to his knees.

The wind came on more furiously, carrying twigs that nicked at him as they flew past, and sand that stung his eyes and reddened his face. He rose against the blow and turned.

She was still there, floating in the air, flames dancing around her, hair flying wildly.

Then she was a little girl again, but no less ominous—indeed more threatening as her eyes rolled back to show blue, and her mouth opened wide in a sinister hiss.

Spragan ran past her, and he was half-running and half-flying as the wind gripped him and rushed him along. He cried out and tried to duck, but too late. Even though he managed to lift an arm, it served as little defense as he smashed into a low branch and was thrown onto his back.

The ground below him reverberated with music, like a heartbeat, and the air hummed with the woman's song.

Words flitted through poor Spragan's mind: "ghost" … "banshee" … But whatever it was, whatever *she* was, he knew beyond doubt that he was doomed. Though dazed, his nose broken, he tried to run on, blood filling his mouth, tears dulling his vision.

But she was there at every turn, young or old, and terribly beautiful.

So terribly beautiful.

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Lathan set the axe between his feet, spat in both his hands, and gripped the handle tightly. He gave a growl as he lifted the axe back over his right shoulder, lining up his first strike on the young elm tree, but he had to pause when the axe brushed the branch of a nearby pine.

Lathan looked at it curiously, wondering how he hadn't noticed it was so close. With a shrug, he shifted a step to the side and hoisted the axe once more.

A gust of wind hit him just as he began his swing, and the pine beside him swayed in the sudden breeze, and again his axe clipped through needled branches as it came forth, and before it could gain any momentum, it got hooked on one of those branches and held fast.

"What the—?" Lathan asked aloud as he turned to regard the tree.

Then the wind began to blow more furiously, and the pine danced as wildly as Lathan's blond hair. Stubbornly he tugged at the axe,

but the tree held it fast.

"No, you don't!" he growled in defiance, and with a great tug, he tore the axe free. Before the wind could interfere again, he turned and swung at the elm.

But the tree was faster, bending low and to the side, sweeping past him with a great *whoosh*, and as Lathan tried to continue his swing, he found his legs pulled out from under him, throwing him facedown to the ground, the axe bouncing from his grasp. And still the tree wound back, pulling the caught Lathan with it, though he clawed desperately at the ground to stop his slide.

Finally he did stop, and he rolled, trying to free his foot.

The wind stopped as abruptly as it had come up, and that seemed a good thing to Lathan only as long as it took him to realize that he was caught in the branch of a rather tall pine tree that was bent low.

He managed to gasp before the rush of the tree's return swing snatched him up and took his breath away, lifting him high and fast into the air, only to let him go at exactly the right moment.

Screaming, spinning, flailing wildly and helplessly, Lathan flew through the forest. Every instant, he cringed, thinking he was about to splatter against a tree or branch, but each time he somehow missed, as if the forest was getting out of his way.

On he flew, out of the forest, and below him, Roundabout looked up, mouth agape. Over the boat and the dock he went, out to the waters of Lac Dinneshere, where he landed with a great splash.

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"Ashelia! Wizard!" Roundabout cried, sprinting to the boat to grab a rope or something to throw to the lad, who flailed in the water some thirty feet out from the dock.

The two came out of the cabin just as a second missile soared overhead, much higher and farther than Lathan. Easily a hundred feet out from the dock, the woodsman's axe splashed into the waters of Lac Dinneshere.

Roundabout's very first throw of the rope proved perfect, but still it took them some time to pull the shivering, terrified Lathan from

the frigid water.

"Get him inside afore his toes fall off!" Ashelia instructed.

"Spragan! Where is Spragan?" Addadearber yelled at the wailing young man.

They hustled him off the dock, and before they even reached the cabin, Addadearber had his answer. Rushing out of the forest, crying and screaming, waving his arms as if a hive of bees was right behind him, came poor Spragan, his face all cut and bloody, his jacket shredded, one shoe missing. He fell to the ground, obviously not for the first time, and Roundabout ran to him.

Spragan screamed and tried to flee.

The ranger called out his name in comforting tones and tried to reach for him in an unthreatening manner, but Spragan howled all the louder, and thrashed as if fighting for his very life against a horde of demons. He tried to run away, but got his feet all tangled and fell down again.

Roundabout was on him in an instant, expertly tying him up in a paralyzing hold, one that put the ranger's mouth near to Spragan's ear, where he whispered reassurances.

But if the boy heard him, he didn't show it, and just began wailing, "She's going to eat me! She's going to eat me!" over and over again.

Roundabout glanced at the dark forest, then set his feet under him and hauled himself and the boy up, keeping the lad's arms fully locked all the way. With superior strength, he lifted Spragan right from the ground so that he couldn't dig in his heels and get any leverage to tug free.

But by then, the boy had fallen limp anyway, sobbing quietly and whispering every so often that he didn't want to die.

A short while later, Addadearber and Roundabout stood beside the cabin, staring into the forest. Behind them, the sun reached in long rays across Lac Dinneshere.

"I see more intrigue than trepidation on your face, wizard," Roundabout remarked after a long silence.

"Magic," the wizard answered. "Lots of it."

“Felt it when we first got here,” the ranger agreed. “Do you know the name of this place?”

“Didn’t know it had a name.”

“Only the barbarian tribes know it,” Roundabout explained. “They named it *Iruladoon* long, long ago, before Ten-Towns, when the elves were thick in Icewind Dale.”

“I’ve not heard that word before.”

“Old Elvish word,” Roundabout explained. “It translates to ‘a place without time.’ I expect the barbarians thought it appropriate because the long-lived elves didn’t seem to age.”

“Spragan talked about a girl, a woman, in various stages of age all at once. Might it be that there’s more to the naming of Iruladoon than simpleton barbarians being confused by long-lived elves?”

“You want to find out, of course,” Roundabout remarked.

“I’ve devoted my whole life to the Art,” Addadearber replied. “It is my religion, my hope that there is something more beyond this pitiful, short existence we’re offered. And now I, like so many of my colleagues, have watched the collapse of all that we hold dear. I stand before a place of magic—that much is assured. Does it hold some answers? Some hope? I know not, but know that I am bound by my faith to find out.”

“The wood’s not wanting visitors,” Roundabout reminded him.

Addadearber nodded. “I have a spell that will allow me passage. I fear to use it, but I shall. And you, of course, believe that you can enter Iruladoon.”

Roundabout nodded, and with a grin to his companion, the ranger pulled up his hood.

“Should we wait until morning?” the wizard asked.

“I prefer the dark,” Roundabout replied with a wink of his blue eye.

The ranger moved to the trees at a careful pace. He paused for just a moment when he reached the tree line, then nodded and disappeared into the forest.

Addadearber cast a minor spell upon himself and squinted into the shadows, ensuring that his spell had worked to enhance his lowlight vision. Then he paused and prepared himself for the more potent,

and thus, far more dangerous, dweomer. Not long ago, the enchantment had been a routine thing to powerful Addadearber, but since the advent of the Spellplague, he hadn't dared attempt it. Reports from all over Faerûn spoke of wizards permanently trapped inside one of their own spells, and Addadearber didn't find that prospect particularly appealing.

But the forest beckoned him, the promise of revelation. He gave a short puff, blowing out all of his doubts, and immediately launched into casting. Arms waving, he chanted furiously, throwing all of his power into the dweomer, reminding himself of the potential consequences of failure.

He turned black head to toe. Not a darker hue, but absolute black, seeming almost dimensionless in his monotone color. Then he flattened, parchment thin, as the wraithform took full hold.

Addadearber didn't breathe in his undead form, but if he did, he would be breathing easier, to be sure. Roundabout had gone into Iruladoon cautiously, but the wizard needed no such care. Not in that form, where he could slip silently and unnoticed from deepening shadow to deepening shadow.

As if carried on a stiff breeze, a parchment blowing in the wind, Addadearber soared up and between the lines of trees.

He sensed Roundabout as he glided past the creeping man, who stiffened and sniffed and glanced all around, but never caught on to Addadearber's passing. With great speed, he managed the entire perimeter of Iruladoon before the onset of twilight, coming back to the same area where he had first entered the wood. Then he went in deeper, following no path but his own instincts, weaving silently and invisibly in the darkening night.

His eyes flashed as he crested one hill, for there, in the distance, he saw a campfire. As he neared it, he noted that it was on the edge of a small pond. Behind it and to the side, a circular door had been set against the face of an earthen mound—the type of house he had seen in halfling communities. And so he was not surprised when exactly that, a halfling with curly brown hair and a disarming, easy stride walked out from behind the house, a fishing pole over one shoulder and his other thumb hooked under one of the red

suspenders that held up his breeches, which in turn held up his rather ample belly.

Addadearber held back and let the little one set the pole upon a forked stick he had set in the bank, though he didn't bother to cast his line just then. He went back to his fire and assembled a tripod, upon which he hung a sizable pot. Then he went to the pond with a bucket. Apparently soup or stew was on the menu for that night.

Satisfied that there was nothing amiss about the place, and likely no one else about, the wizard closed his eyes and released his dweomer. He felt only a few short instances of tingling pain as his body expanded to its three-dimensional proportions.

He allowed himself a deep sigh of relief.

"You call this place home?" the wizard asked, startling the halfling.

The little one turned to regard the man with curiosity. "You shouldn't be here," he said, obvious alarm in his voice. "This is not your place."

"But I am here, and I am not pleased."

The halfling cocked his head, and if he was concerned by the wizard's tone, he did not show it.

"Do you know who I am?"

The halfling shook his head.

"I am Addadearber of the Lightning!"

The halfling shrugged.

"I am the chief mage of Caer-Dineval, the mightiest wizard of Icewind Dale," Addadearber declared.

That seemed to pique the little one's interest, as his mouth formed the words "Icewind Dale" incredulously.

"The mightiest!" the impatient wizard reiterated.

The halfling wore a wry smile and glanced around. "I doubt that."

"And that is why I am here. A couple of my friends were ill-treated by the forest you call home—or by some wizard within. They were expelled, brutally, and by magic."

"They did not belong here."

"You say that a lot."

“For your own, and for their own, benefit,” the halfling explained. “This is not a place for visitors. You should leave.”

“Little one, do not anger me. You will not enjoy the spectacle of an angry Addadearber. I will leave when I decide …”

Before he could properly finish the thought, a large fish broke the water near the bank beside him and slapped its tail at just an angle to send a spray of water over him.

The wizard glared at the water, then at the halfling. “You did that!” he accused.

He got splashed again, then again.

“No,” the giggling halfling said. “They don’t answer to me. If they did, I wouldn’t need my pole.”

“You try my patience!” Addadearber said when he was splashed yet again. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. There were things here he wanted to learn about, and certainly not in an adversarial way.

“Who are you?” he asked, calm.

The halfling shrugged.

“How long have you lived in Iruladoon?”

“Iruladoon?”

“This place. How long?”

Again, the halfling shrugged. “Time has little meaning here. Months? Years? I don’t know.”

“And what do you do?”

“I fish. I sculpt—have you an interest in scrimshaw?” He turned and indicated the round door of his home.

The wizard got splashed again.

“And you instruct your forest to treat visitors in an ill manner,” Addadearber said. The halfling laughed at that, and as another wave of water sprayed Addadearber, the wizard pointed accusingly and stepped forward to warn, “Do not ever mock me!”

To his surprise, the little one didn’t shrink back in the least, but just stood there looking at him, curious, shaking his head. Normally when Addadearber voiced such a proclamation, mothers took their children off the streets and great warriors quivered, and that

injustice, that little halfling looking at him with something akin to pity, was more than he could take.

"You insignificant ant! I could reduce you to ash with a mere thought!"

The halfling glanced to the side, to the waters of the lake, and sighed, and returned his gaze to Addadearber with a finger held up over pursed lips and a warning of, "Shh."

"What?" Addadearber replied, then he, too, looked at the lake, and his eyes widened. There, just off shore, the water churned in a wide circle, silent at first but then growing strong enough so that waves cupped over and splashed around the growing whirlpool.

"You really should leave," the halfling said.

"I came here to learn," the wizard replied, trying hard to keep the rising fear out of his voice. "The world is troubled—magic is ill. My goddess has gone silent."

"I know more about that than you ever will, I fear," the halfling interrupted.

"Then you must tell me everything."

"Go away. For your own sake, wizard, leave this place and do not return."

"No!" Addadearber yelled above the rising tumult of the churning water. "Enough of your games and tricks! I will have my answers!"

He got one, then and there, as a sudden and unseen wind slammed him in the side, throwing his hat far and wide, and throwing him behind it, arms and legs flapping. He splashed hard against the side of the whirlpool and was swept up in its mighty current. Around and around he went, splashing futilely to try to get out of the vortex.

He called out to the halfling, who just stood there on the bank, thumbs hooked under his suspenders, a resigned and pitying look on his face.

Down went Addadearber, lower and lower against the unrelenting press of the water. Dizzy and disoriented, the strength leaving his arms, he could not resist, and was plunged under. He came up only once, sputtering a garbled curse at the halfling, then he disappeared.

The halfling sighed as the water flattened to a nearly dead calm once more, the placid trout pond looking as if nothing had happened.

Except for the hat. Out in the middle of the pond, the wizard's floppy, conical hat bobbed on the few remaining ripples.

The halfling grabbed his fishing pole. He always prided himself on his ability to cast a line.

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Roundabout crept through the trees, his appreciation for the strange forest growing with every step. He hadn't been through Iruladoon for more than a year, and since then it had changed entirely. A year past it had been a cold pine forest trying to find root in the harsh environs of Icewind Dale, with sparse, seasonal underbrush and a short flowering season. But the forest had indeed changed. He could sense it. The vibrancy of life there could not be ignored; the colors, smells, and sounds filled the air with a sort of heartbeat, a sensation, a vibration or sound, under his feet, a cadence for the rhythms of nature. There was a uniquely divine energy to it, tingling all around him.

The sun disappeared in the west and the forest grew dark, but the half-elf didn't fear the place. His hands did not slip near the hilts of his sheathed sword and dirk.

The heartbeat—music, in a sense—grew. Roundabout felt the power as if its source was approaching him.

"Where are you, wizard?" he whispered to the empty air.

The forest went preternaturally silent, and Roundabout held his breath.

And then he saw her, through the trees not far away, a woman in a white gown and with a black cloak, dancing carefree through the trees. Compelled, he followed, and he wound up lying on a mossy embankment beneath a stand of pines, staring out at a small meadow where the barefoot witch danced in starlight.

Roundabout lost his heart at that moment, for never had he seen any woman quite so beautiful and graceful. He couldn't even blink,

fearing to lose the image before him even momentarily. He wouldn't let it go. He couldn't let it go.

She danced and she twirled and she sang, and her voice was the song of Iruladoon.

She was the wizard who had enchanted the wood, Roundabout was certain.

Or the goddess … and that thought had the ranger holding his breath once more, had his hands trembling and sweating, and no one who knew Roundabout had ever seen him in such a state.

She stopped her dance and her song, and brushed her thick auburn hair back from in front of her face, revealing eyes so blue that even the night could not dull their inviting luster.

Roundabout shifted uncomfortably. He knew logically that she could not see him, and yet there was no doubt in his mind that she looked at him directly. He thought he should stand and introduce himself, and explain himself.

But he couldn't move. His legs would not answer his call to stand. His mouth refused to form the words to call out to her.

She smiled and shook her head then spun into her dance again, twirling around and around, faster and faster, until she was but a blur of flowing robes. And from that she leaped, as if upon the starlight itself.

And she was gone.

Gone from the meadow, but not from the mind of Roundabout. He saw her still, he clutched the image. He never wanted to let it go. He never wanted to look at anything else ever again. Just her, forever her. In that dancing creature, that witch, or ghost, or goddess, Roundabout had witnessed the perfection of nature itself.

He managed to mouth the name "Mielikki," and recognized, albeit briefly, that he wasn't lying down any longer, but had regained his feet.

Then he saw her again, in his mind or in front of him—it mattered not—dancing under the stars.

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Addadearber came up with a gasp and a wild splash, sucking in air. His lungs ached and he desperately gulped more air. It took him a long time to even hear Ashelia calling to him from the bank near the dock, only a few feet from him.

He managed to get there and crawl out of the lake, trembling with fear and shivering with cold.

"How in the Nine Hells …?" the woman asked.

Addadearber shook his head, considering the whirlpool and the tunnel of water that had flushed him from Iruladoon, right back into the small lagoon. It made no sense, even to a man who had flown in the empty air, who had turned enemies into frogs, and who created lightning and fire out of thin air.

"Well, what do ye know?" Ashelia asked, helping him from the water.

But Addadearber could only wag his head and sputter.

Almost at the same moment, Roundabout walked out of the forest, his step light, his eyes glassy, and he seemed not even to recognize them or notice any of his surroundings.

"Roundabout!" Ashelia called, and she let go of the wizard and ran to the ranger.

He looked at her as though unable to understand her alarm. Then he looked all around, at the cabin and the lake, at the dock and *Larson's Boneyard* tied up against it. His face screwed up with puzzlement, and he shrugged.

"They attacked me!" Addadearber insisted, storming up to the pair. "I will burn that forest to the ground!

"If you raise a torch or a spell against it, I will kill you," Roundabout replied, and both Ashelia and Addadearber gasped.

"Ranger!" the fisherwoman scolded.

"We have to leave this place," Roundabout said, retracting not a bit of his threat.

"We're sailing in the morning."

"We're sailing now," the ranger corrected.

"We? I thought you were to remain on this bank," Addadearber said with a sharp tone, obviously unhappy with the threat. "With your friends who haunt the forest, perhaps?"

“Shut up, wizard.” Roundabout turned to Ashelia. “To Lac Dinneshere, all of us, and now.”

“Spragan’s still stupid, and Lathan’s still hurting,” Ashelia argued.

“I will row or tack, then, and so will Addadearber.”

“You have grown quite bold,” the wizard warned.

But Roundabout only smiled, and glanced back at Iruladoon. He had seen her. The witch, the ghost, the goddess—with that celestial image still fresh in his mind, there was little the blustering Addadearber could say that could bother him.

Unless the wizard did indeed try to turn his anger, magic or mundane, at the forest.

Roundabout smiled, hardly believing his own heart, for he knew that in that instance, he truly would kill the man.

They put out from the dock soon after, all glad to be gone from the haunted forest.

All, except for Roundabout, who knew that he wasn’t really leaving, that he took a piece of Iruladoon with him, and would hold it forevermore.

For he would never allow himself to forget the dance of the goddess, and her ladder of starlight.

An original short story
Wizards of the Coast, 2010



To Legend He Goes

To Legend He Goes" was actually part of the prelude of *Gauntlgrym*. My editor on that book, Phil Athans, suggested to me that we take it out so that I could expand on it and better present the continuing tale of Wulfgar, and better explain the missing decades of his eventful life. When I saw that we could take it out and that the remaining references and scenes with Wulfgar in the novel remained strong and consistent, I agreed—mostly because once again we are going to a place that has become important to me at this stage of my writing journey.

It occurs to me that being a writer means standing naked on a stage while a chamber full of clothed people point out all of your imperfections … and with the internet, many of those clothed folk can hide in the shadows at the same time.

A writer has to be honest; there's no place to hide, and no fabric to hide imperfections. It doesn't matter what you "meant" to say; it only matters what you said—no, I take that back. It only matters what the reader thinks you said, because the only person who can determine the relationship between a book and a reader is the reader of the book. Not the author, not the critic, not some guy on a message board. Going back to what I said in the introduction to "Iruladoon," I am a writer because I am the reader of my work, my internal dialogue.

"To Legend He Goes" is an important piece of this personal, spiritual journey. Now the questions of the pocket heaven, Iruladoon, become all the more poignant and complicated. I invite

you readers to see Iruladoon in this light. Instead of asking “what is Bob doing here?” ask yourself the implications of this concept on these characters you, too, have known as friends. Consider the time that has passed for Wulfgar, time in an entirely different and rich life. What must the old barbarian think of the startling revelation he finds in this story?

And instead of considering (or worrying about, or driving yourself crazy over) the practical implications of these events in the wider story arc of the Legend of Drizzt, consider them in light of the individuals involved.

Why do I offer this advice? Because if you look through Wulfgar’s eyes, honestly, or through the eyes of the other principal characters involved in this evolving and unexplained circumstance, the questions you will ask of yourself will be far more important, I hope, than the implications to Drizzt Do’Urden. I know that to be the truth for me, and at this point I’m not even considering any implications to the meta-story.

That meta-story didn’t even matter to me as I wrote this Wulfgar tale. This is a necessary addition to the tales of the Companions of the Hall, owed to Wulfgar, surely. Wulfgar is my vessel of exploration here; it is not a gimmick, but a journey, and one forcing upon me important personal questions.

Questions, perhaps, without answers.

Or maybe I just need to write more.





Wulfgar had defied age like no other in recent memory. Some said it was the magic of the dwarves who had raised him wearing off on him. Others just pointed out that the legendary chieftains were often known for long and productive lives. Whatever the cause, Wulfgar had held his own in the hunt and in many battles, and not one in the tribe had whispered that it was time for him to drift on a floe.

But these were not usual times for the Tribe of the Elk, and the stakes were much higher.

"Were it not for Wulfgar, we would not be allowed on the hunt," Canaufa reminded Brayleen, the two women standing off to the side of the large encampment of the Tribe of the Elk.

"There remain many who question the wisdom of that," Brayleen countered. "The loss of a man does not weaken the tribe as much as does the loss of a woman. The seed of one can fill the wombs of many, but one womb, one child, one year."

"And yet, you will remain here for the hunt."

The simple logical retort had Brayleen's face tightening with defeat.

"They say he learned it from the elves," Canaufa went on, "where gender is no matter."

"Or from the dwarves," Brayleen added. "From what few females they claim."

Both paused to watch the council across the way. The decision had been made that the tribe would move along to the northwest. Although the caribou had not yet left the mountainous foothills along the Spine of the World, too many monsters had shown themselves in the region, and a tribe of orcs was known to be crawling from a mountain hole not far away. All the other tribes

had already begun the winter migration, leaving the Tribe of the Elk alone and exposed.

The snows had come early this year, and that was never a good thing for the barbarian tribes roaming the tundra of Icewind Dale. The unseasonal storms had brought the yetis down from the peaks and thinned the caribou herd before they even began their great trek across the narrow tundra to the sea. For the barbarians, the result was that supplies were short and danger was ever present.

All that was left to decide was who would remain for the last hunt—which was as much an exercise of deciding who would no longer partake of the dwindling supplies.

"It is different to allow women to hunt and fight than to allow an old man along," Brayleen countered. "His presence alone may prove a threat."

"Not so!" Canaufa interrupted sharply. "He will not be burdensome. Wulfgar would never allow such a thing! He would not accept a litter if his legs rotted away underneath him. Nay, he would be left to die by his own demand."

She snorted and continued, "And likely, knowing Wulfgar, he will not continue to eat the foodstuffs of a hungry tribe."

Brayleen sighed.

"I would be proud to have him along," Canaufa said.

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"You cannot do this!" Bruenorson argued.

"You claim no power over me, my son," Wulfgar reminded him calmly.

"I am Chieftain."

"And I am your father," Wulfgar said. "And the grandfather of your brood."

"And you would have me sentence you to death," Bruenorson said. "How might I explain that to my sisters, my children, my grandchildren?"

"Are you so sentencing Ilfgol and the others?" Wulfgar countered.

"That's different!" Bruenorson said.

“Because they are young and strong,” Wulfgar said, “and I am old and will surely die in the weather and among the monsters?”

Bruenorson licked his lips. He was nearly forty years old, and had led the Tribe of the Elk for almost a decade, since the death of Kierstaad the Swift, but truly he felt a child before this man, Wulfgar, his father, his mentor, his hero. Wulfgar had been well past sixty when he had sired Bruenorson, the third of his children and the first boy. The other two had married into other tribes, royally binding Elk with Bear and Seal, and had begun families of their own.

“Do not answer,” Wulfgar went on. “Your loyalty is touching.”

Bruenorson began to speak, but Wulfgar cut him short. “Yes,” he admitted, “your eyes do not deceive. I am failing. At long last, the Halls of Tempus have begun to whisper of the arrival of Wulfgar.”

“No,” Bruenorson said.

“Yes,” Wulfgar replied. “But fear not, for I have not yet breathed my last. I know these foothills better than any in the tribe. I know where to find the caribou as they prepare for their journey. I know how to find sign of the yeti and avoid them—again, better than any. You do no service to the tribe or to those who will remain to hunt by keeping me with you.”

“Perhaps those who will hunt do not wish you along,” Bruenorson said, and he winced as soon as the words left his mouth. Wulfgar puffed out his still-massive chest and stood tall over him, those icy blue eyes boring into the chieftain and making him seem very small indeed.

“Your responsibility is to your tribe, not your family,” Wulfgar reminded him. “If you make the decision along those lines alone, you will accede to the council’s decision.”

Bruenorson swallowed hard. “And bid farewell to a man I most love?”

Wulfgar leaned over and hugged his son, a rare display of affection among the stoic people. But Bruenorson didn’t recoil and didn’t stiffen in the least, burying his face in his huge father’s strong shoulder.

The tribe of the Elk left the foothills that morning, leaving twelve, Wulfgar among them, to seek the caribou.



This was the illness that would at last claim him, he knew. His lungs felt heavy with fluid, his limbs weak, and a great fire burned within him. Wulfgar would not lament his death; what man could ask for more of a life than he had lived? He did feel guilty, though, given the timing and the circumstances. The Tribe of the Elk had been gone for nearly a tenday, leaving behind the hunters in their critical role: finding the caribou and sending supplies while the migrating herd caught up to the tribe. Few in number, the hunters couldn't be burdened with the likes of Wulfgar, withering in his fever.

So Wulfgar had ordered them to be gone from his small tent, and to be done with him altogether.

But they would not, he knew. He was Wulfgar, son of Beornegar. He was the hero of Icewind Dale, the great warrior who had united the tribes and changed their very way of life so much for the better. Unlike their kin south of the Spine of the World, the tribes of Icewind Dale valued all their members, male and female, as equals. Unlike their kin south of the Spine of the World, the barbarian tribes of Icewind Dale knew they could depend on each other for support in times of peril, and not expect other tribes to exploit their weaknesses and misfortunes. Unlike their kin south of the Spine of the World, the tribes of Icewind Dale knew that they could find allies, not enemies, in the other settlers of their region.

Wulfgar had done all of that, but not alone. He had begun the process, but his progeny were taking it to new levels. His oldest son commanded the Tribe of the Elk with the same even hand that Wulfgar had shown decades before. His oldest daughter was wife to the chieftain of the Tribe of the Bear, and his youngest had married the mightiest warrior of the Tribe of the Seal, who spent most of the year out on the Sea of Moving Ice. Three surviving children of four had flourished in the tribulations of Icewind Dale; nine grandchildren had grown strong into respectable members of

various tribes, and now his second-oldest grandson was poised to assume leadership of the Tribe of the Caribou.

Wulfgar's fourth great-grandchild had been born that spring, and, alas, he had not yet seen the babe. He felt that sting keenly as he lay feverish in his cot. But also, surprisingly, there came to him a sense of calm with the knowledge that even without him, the world would move forward, his bloodline would continue and would thrive.

Hours passed as he lay there, recounting his many adventures, remembering dear old friends, including one special group he had not seen in half a century. "The Companions of the Hall," he managed to whisper through his shivering lips, a nickname the five friends had earned well in the days of Wulfgar's youth.

This was the end for him. He wondered if any of his old friends remained—Drizzt, possibly, and perhaps even Bruenor. He was contented and ready to pass on, though not particularly thrilled that he would die in his bed.

Or would he?

A commotion outside the tent stirred him from his thoughts. He heard the words of two of his companions, and one of those words, "yeti," stirred something deep and profound in Wulfgar. His fever forgotten, he rolled off the side of his furs and forced himself to his feet.

He stumbled outside and, upon hearing the news, his limbs grew strong once more. Standing up straight, he hoisted Aegis-fang, his legendary warhammer.

"Stay true to our course," he instructed the group gathered around him, all of whom were stunned that he had managed to get out of bed. "Break camp, collect our supplies, and begin the march to the northwest."

"We'll not leave Canaufa's party out there!" one man complained.

"No," Wulfgar agreed with a wry grin, "we'll not. By my promise, we'll not."

Some of the hunters smiled back at him, some nodded, but more than one shook his head doubtfully.

"This you owe to me, I decree," Wulfgar said. "In this, defer to me, this last time."

How were they to argue? The man was a god among them, the greatest warrior the tribes of Icewind Dale had ever known.

On shaky old legs, Wulfgar climbed the slick and slippery stones. Not once did he glance back to the now-distant encampment that was being broken down even then. His great strides carried him fast and far, and he did not slow, could not slow, knowing that members of his clan were in trouble.

Yetis, Wulfgar confirmed as soon as he reached the rocky spur and heard the growls and calls beyond. At the sound, he was transformed once more, as if a second infusion of energy had come into him, stealing away ever more years from his aged frame. "Tempus," he said under his breath, his voice not quite as thick with phlegm. "Give me strength this day."

Climbing the stones quickly, he came over the apex of the spur and saw the fight in plain view below him. He winced at the sight of a fellow tribesman lying in his own blood, at another swarmed by three of the large and shaggy bearlike beasts, and at the pair of women, back to back, stabbing with their spears to fend off several of the circling brutes.

Wulfgar pulled himself up to his full height, still more than six and a half feet. "Tempus!" he roared into the northern wind, and he grunted hard as he flexed his muscles, launching his magical warhammer at the nearest yeti.

It was dead before it landed.

Down leaped Wulfgar, no more the old man but seeming like the warrior who had become a hero throughout the dale and across the breadth of the northern realms. Roaring to his god, he lifted his hand and caught the magically returned hammer, the gift of a dwarf father whom he had not seen in more than five decades.

As if drawing strength from the magic of that weapon, he crashed into the nearest group of beasts, pushing them away with hand and hammer, chopping them down with short but devastating strikes. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted one of the women in trouble, and despite his own predicament, the old warrior launched his warhammer.

His throw was true, he saw in the brief moment before a yeti took advantage of his vulnerability. Leaping upon him, the yeti's long and hooked claws raked at his abdomen.

Wulfgar grabbed the beast's hair and yanked its head back so violently he heard the snap of neck bones. Slugging the shaggy beast hard under the chin, he threw it aside, then drove his elbow out the other way, smashing the jaw of another approaching yeti. His hammer returned to his hand as the beast staggered backward, just far enough for Wulfgar to chop his hammer across, crushing its skull.

"Tempus!" he roared, and on he came, thrashing wildly, throwing every ounce of energy in his old and battered frame behind every sweeping swing. A yeti leaped upon him from behind, and few men could have held their footing.

But Wulfgar, who had passed his one-hundredth birthday, remained such a man.

He felt the agony as the beast bit down on his collar, looping one claw around and hooking it in the gash already pouring blood from his abdomen. Wulfgar spun and reached back to punch at the beast, or to grab it and try to tug its claws free.

But he could not. With the beast on his back, it took him many strides to get near a large rock, where he swung around and threw himself backward. Again and again, he slammed the yeti into the stone, and during one crash, yet another beast leaped on him from in front, clawing and biting.

And a third hit him, driving the pile sidelong, and Wulfgar down to one knee.

Across the way, a woman screamed.

With a cry to his god that shook the very stones of Icewind Dale, stubborn Wulfgar lifted himself to his feet, hoisted the large yetis up from the ground, and threw his arms wide with such force that all three of the monsters were flung away. Before they could come back at him, he hit them—one, two, three—with mighty Aegis-fang. His long gray hair and beard flying in the wind, Wulfgar charged ahead.

He launched his warhammer, smashing yet another yeti aside a heartbeat before it would have bitten out the remaining woman's

throat, as she was held vulnerable by the last of the beasts.

Not even waiting for his warhammer, Wulfgar threw himself into that last monster, lifting it, driving it, wedging himself between the yeti and the warrior woman to break its grasp. They tumbled aside in a heap, away from the woman, the yeti clawing, Wulfgar punching, both biting.

Finally Wulfgar managed to cup the beast's chin, his other hand grabbing at the thick mane. He twisted and tugged, turning the head sidelong, and kept driving, ignoring the agony as the yeti got its clawed hand into his gut, right through the wound torn by two of its companions.

Wulfgar reversed direction, then tugged back with sudden ferocity, and at last the beast's neck broke.

Wulfgar managed to shove the heavy creature aside and wriggle out from under it. Rolling to his knees, he caught his warhammer and tried to rise, but when he saw that the fight had ended, every yeti dead or fleeing, all strength left him. He hoped he had saved more than just the one woman, hoped that some of the five who lay around her would not succumb to their wounds.

Then he was on his back, staring up at the falling snow and the steel gray sky. An image appeared over him, that of Brayleen, the warrior woman, and beside her was Canaufa, her fighting partner, helping a young and strong man.

Wulfgar smiled.

"Elder Wulfgar, rest easy," Brayleen said as comfortingly as she could manage. "We'll get you home!"

She turned to the other two survivors, but Wulfgar knew the truth of it, knew at long last that his road had reached its inevitable end. He caught her by the wrist and would not let her continue. When she looked at him curiously, his contented smile answered all of her questions.

"See to the others, if any are alive," he whispered, each word coming hard as the ravages of his injuries and his illness gained the upper hand.

"They are dead, all three dead," she said.

"Then back to the camp, all of you," he instructed.

“Elder Wulfgar,” she whispered, holding back tears.

“Cry for the others,” he said, his voice steady and serene, and indeed, a great calm had come over him.

He felt very conscious of the belief that he was writing the ending of his tale, right then, right there, and he took great comfort in knowing that it was a life well lived.

“Your cairn will be the greatest ever built in the dale,” the man, Ilfgol, promised, and he, too, could not hold back his tears, his eyes moist, his cheeks wet.

Wulfgar considered the snow—there would be a great blizzard that day—and knew that the pyre would be symbolic only. For like so many of his fellows, he would be lost to the white emptiness of Icewind Dale’s merciless winter.

With his fast-dissipating strength, he lifted Aegis-fang toward Brayleen. “Not the beasts nor goblins of the dale will have this,” he said. “Not the folk of Ten-Towns, not the dwarves from whence it came. It is for the tribe, for the warrior most worthy.”

“For Brayleen, then,” said Ilfgol, and Canaufa agreed.

But Brayleen deferred strongly. “For Bruenorson,” she assured Wulfgar, and the large hero smiled at that welcomed promise.

Each of the three took turns clasping Wulfgar’s hand, then each bent low to kiss him and to offer their thanks for his gallant rescue.

Then they were gone—it was the way of Icewind Dale—and Wulfgar let his ravaged body rest easy, inviting death to take him.

It came heralded by music, to his pleasant surprise, and the song was sweet and inviting. He didn’t know if it was actually his corporeal body or his departing spirit, but for some reason he did not understand, he was crawling then, through the mud and snow. He didn’t feel the cold and didn’t hear the wind.

Just the song, calling to him, beckoning him forward, though he knew not where he was nor where he was going.

Nor did he know how long he had crawled, just that at last the darkness was closing in. Defiantly, the old barbarian regained his feet, stood tall, and threw his arms up high. He meant to call out to his god to take him and be done with it, but before he shouted, he

noted a most curious sight before him: a thick forest, in springtime bloom, and so shockingly out of place in the Icewind Dale winter.

Something flew out at him, striking him in the chest. He was quick enough to catch it before it fell to the ground, although the movement sent him back to his knees, his strength failing.

Trembling fingers brought the item up before him: a carving of bone, of a woman with a bow.

Wulfgar's thoughts drifted back across the years as he stared at the scrimshaw, its depiction so reminiscent of one he had once known, and the artistry of the carving so typical of the work of another he had once known.

His fingers failed him and the scrimshaw fell to the ground, and Wulfgar descended to all fours. Stubbornly, he crawled. Beyond the limit of his remaining, waning strength, he crawled, toward the forest and the music, into the forest and the music, until at last he collapsed.

In the darkness, the music remained and Wulfgar enjoyed its sweet notes, and he hoped that he could listen to it for eternity.

He opened his eyes some time later—he knew not how long he had lain in the snow.

"The whole of the season?" he asked aloud, for the air was warm around him, and the scent of flowers filled the air.

His knees did not hurt. His abdomen had repaired. His breath came strong and clear.

Confused, Wulfgar pulled himself up to his knees, and before he lifted his eyes, he heard a voice from long, long ago.

"Well met, old friend," it said, he said, Regis of Lonelywood said.

Wulfgar froze in place, then jumped to his feet in shock as he saw that it was indeed Regis before him, standing on a path that wound between beds of tended flowers, a small and still pond off to the side. Light snow coated the flora, but it was hardly wintry.

Wulfgar stood tall, taller than he had in decades, and felt strong again, full of energy and without pain in joints that had known the sting of age for so many years.

He wanted to ask a thousand questions, but none came forth, and he wound up just shaking his head in stunned disbelief.

Then he nearly fell over, for across the small pond, she appeared.

Catti-brie. The woman he had loved in his long-ago youth, and she appeared exactly as she had looked those decades before, a teenage girl, or early twenties, perhaps.

"Impossible," the barbarian whispered, and he found himself moving her way as if compelled by magic. His strides increased as the woman, singing still, spun away and melted into the forest. As soon as she was out of his sight, Wulfgar started to run, splashing along the edge of the pond.

"Wulfgar!" Regis yelled, so uncharacteristically forcefully that the barbarian stopped and spun back around.

Almost back around, for as he turned, he caught his own reflection, and there he stopped and stared until the water calmed, until he saw himself more clearly, his thick and long blond hair, his light and thin beard.

Blond hair, not white. Thick hair, not thinned by the passage of a century. The hair of a young man.

Panic hit him and he glanced all around.

For he was dead. He had to be dead.

But these were not the halls of Tempus.

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